Son of Man

Chronicles of New Eden, prequel

by Hayden Pearton, ...

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CAUTION:
This is not a happy story.
You have been warned.

May You Walk Unbound

Prologue

Father

The bullet struck his left shoulder, tearing through cartilage, muscle and bone. He felt it exit, a clean through and through. The man who had just shot him wore a shocked expression.

Clearly, he had not meant to fire.

But Isaac knew that his shock would wear off soon, and then he would fire again.

He was standing in a dimly lit alleyway, where he had managed to corner a bandit who had been attempting to rob a nearby store.

Adding to this, he was currently staring down the barrel of a gun, wondering when his adversary would regain his senses.

Sometimes, being a police officer in Paradisia was a difficult job.

Before the war, he would have spent his days patrolling the streets and arresting petty vandals.

Now, he spent his days chasing down murderous bandits and deserting soldiers.

Well, complaints aside, it was still a job.

And he intended to do it properly.

"I repeat, lay down your weapon!" he shouted, moving towards cover. Unsheathing his Solar Staff from its holster, he pressed a recessed button on the centre of the foot-long cylinder. A moment later, it extended in both directions, becoming a six-foot solar-powered staff which could dislodge 50000 volts in a few seconds.

The bandit, holding what was presumably a stolen firearm, chose not to comply with Isaac's instructions.

Instead, he fired again, this time striking the wall a foot from Isaac's position.

"That's it!" Isaac yelled, tensing up, "I tried to do this the nice way!"

A moment later, he moved, rolling diagonally from his position.

As he stood, he unfurled his arm, hurling the Solar Staff with the grace and poise of a professional javelinist.

Thankfully, his police training had been… comprehensive.

The Solar Staff struck the man in the chest, driving him backwards. A heartbeat later the weapon activated, sending 50000 volts through the unfortunate suspect. He shook for a moment, before falling still.

Cradling his wounded shoulder, Isaacs went to check him for a pulse.

He found it after a momentary search, confirming that he had not become a murderer. It was extra paperwork, after all…

"***Officer Gordon, have you detained the first suspect?***" came a voice from his wrist.

"Suspect detained," he replied, speaking into the communicator strapped to his forearm.

Strange that his partner would refer to the suspect as the 'first', though, given that there had only been one to begin with.

"Request confirmation," he said, an uneasy feeling stealing over him, "How many suspects were involved in the robbery?"

"***Confirmation approved. While only one suspect was physically present in the store, dispatch has learned that this individual often works with a woman who is believed to be his wife. She has been spotted in a vehicle nearby at several of his previous robberies, most likely acting as a getaway driver.***"

Dammit.

"Understood. Thank you for the confirmation," he replied, picking up his Solar Staff.

"*I exist to serve,*" his partner replied, and Isaac knew that he wasn't being metaphorical.

His partner, 26618-J, was a re-mech, a human-shaped android built to serve humanity. He could track criminals without rest, take a shotgun blast to the chest and get back up, and most importantly, lay down his life without a second thought.

Truly, the ideal police officer.

Except for the fact that his annual maintenance costs could have covered the yearly salaries of three flesh and blood officers.

In fact, it would be cheaper to just buy a newer re-mech model than it would be to send his partner for another monthly service.

But Isaac would never do that. 26618-J had saved his life on more than one occasion, and he didn't even have a real name.

However, Isaac intended to remedy that. In a few days, it would be the anniversary of 26618-J's admission to the force. Isaac had mulled over what to give the re-mech as a present, and he had settled on a customized set of dog-tags bearing a name he had picked out.

A sudden sound from the other end of the alley made him turn. It sounded like an engine... perhaps 26618-J had arrived with the police transport so that they could take the bandit back to the station.

But the sound was all wrong for their electric vehicle.

Turning, he found the source of the noise: a Voxner 250. It was a high performance multi-wheeler which was used in every sector, from mining to transport. It could accelerate to full speed in just under ten seconds, and weighed close to twenty tonnes.

It filled the width of the dead-end alleyway, leaving no room to slip past it. In the driver's cabin was a woman who wore a look of determination.

He had seen that look before, often on suspects who had resigned themselves to killing their way out of a situation.

It was not a good look.

"Get out of the vehicle, now!" he screamed, raising his Solar Staff. In truth, it wouldn't even leave a dent on the reinforced steel, but he hoped that the driver didn't know that.

However, instead of complying with his order, the Voxner began moving towards him. Slowly at first, and then faster, as it picked up speed. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

He was trapped, and he was going to die.

Instead of pointless tears or screams, he closed his eyes. In the darkness before him, he pictured his wife, Marie, and their infant son, Alvin. He wanted his final thoughts to be of them...

He heard the Voxner approach, its engine roaring. The sound reverberated throughout the alleyway, building and amplifying until it filled the tiny space. It surrounded him on all sides, but he did not let it *inside.*

That space belonged only to his family.

He felt a gust of wind blow against his body, most likely pushed forward by the Voxner's charge.

In his heart, however, he was a rock in the storm. Immobile and unmovable.

"Farewell," he said, voice more level than a ruler.

"***Hello,***" a voice replied, against all expectations.

Snapping his eyes open, he did so just in time to see a body fall from the sky. A re-mech, painted in Paradisian white and gold, landed before him.

Directly in the path of the Voxner.

26618-J, his partner, stood before him, a shield against death itself.

And then the Voxner reached them, and chaos consumed the world...

"Officer Gordon, can you hear me?"

A voice, cutting through the darkness. But whose?

With great effort, Isaac opened his eyes.

When he saw the carnage before him, however, he felt like closing them again.

Pieces of red-hot metal and burning puddles of oil filled the alleyway, turning the once ordinary space into a vision of the underworld. The suspect he had arrested was being taken away by a few officers he knew well, whilst the woman who had tried to run him over was being lifted onto a gurney.

"Don't worry, she'll be well enough to stand trial," said the familiar man crouched over him, "She might have to eat a few meals through a straw though..."

"That is... good to hear, Chief," Isaac said, trying to get up.

Chief Palmer, however, held him down with a single finger.

"We got lucky, Isaac. Aside from a few broken ribs which will heal up in no time, you will live to see another day. Only good fortune let us get away without any human casualties..."

Human casualties?

No...

"What—what about 26618-J? What about my partner?!?" Isaac said, voice rising. He did not know whether it was from worry or adrenaline, but he somehow found the strength to get to his feet. When he did, he became aware of two things.

Firstly, his chest hurt like hell.

And secondly, his partner was nowhere to be seen.

No... that was incorrect. What was left of his partner was clearly visible...

"It's a shame, but he did his duty," Chief Palmer said, placing a firm hand on Isaac's uninjured shoulder.

"He didn't deserve this..."

"He's a re-mech, they don't deserve anything," Chief Palmer said, with a tone that belied his true feelings on the matter. It was no secret that the Chief disliked having re-mechs on the force, and he had often gone out of his way to assign them to the most dangerous patrols.

"I don't care. You have to fix him! I was going to give him a name!"

Chief Palmer's hand tightened on his shoulder, sending a jolt of pain throughout his chest.

"Careful, Isaac," he said, in a low voice, "Words like that will have everyone accusing you of being a Freedman sympathiser..."

The Freedman Rebels were a group of humans and re-mechs who had begun campaigning for equal rights for all re-mechs. Initially consisting of peaceful protests, after the death of the leader of the movement, Arthur Freedman, they had taken to using more... violent methods.

"I'm no rebel, chief. I just think that he was a good partner and that fixing him would be beneficial to the force!" Isaac said, anger creeping into his words.

Sighing, Chief Palmer loosened his grip. "Look, Isaac, the truth of the matter is that we simply don't have the funds to fix him. With the amount of damage he sustained from the Voxner it would require an almost completely new frame. I'm afraid that, with the war getting closer by the day, the city council has decided to cut every departmental budget in favour of boosting the city militia's funding. If the fighting reaches Paradisia, they will be our first line of defence, not a bunch of outdated re-mechs playing at being police officers..."

It wasn't fair... Just because humans were trying to kill one another over the remaining green zones, his partner couldn't be fixed?

"What if... what if I paid for the repairs?" he said, the idea hitting him suddenly, "You can even take it out of my future paychecks if you have to!"

Chief Palmer, however, merely shook his head.

"The matter has been settled, Officer Gordon. I will hear no more about this, understand?" he said with a voice of iron.

Softening slightly, he continued, "Now look, I understand that it's been a tough day for you. Facing almost certain death, getting injured, and then losing your partner on top of everything... So I'm going to order you to take the rest of the day off. Go and see the medical team on your way home so that they can patch up your shoulder and wrap your ribs and then straight home, understand?"

Isaac wanted to fight. He wanted to rage. He wanted to shout out against all the things that were wrong with the world.

But most importantly... he wanted his partner back.

So instead of disobeying his chief, he simply nodded.

Slowly, his feet carried him out of the alleyway. Away from the remains of the Voxner. Away from his partner. Away from 26618-J...

No. Even though he had not had a name in life, he still deserved one, even in death.

Feeling the dog tags in his pocket, Isaac sighed and whispered, "Thank you, my friend, for saving me. I am sorry that I couldn't do the same for you... May you rest in peace... Frater..."

"Is something bothering you, Isaac?" Marie asked, as she placed a large pot on the table.

Nearby, Alvin slept soundly in his crib. He rarely cried, even when the neighbours were engaging in their weekly arguments, and still slept through every night without waking. He had a mop of brown curls, just like his father and unlike his golden-haired mother. His eyes, when open, were an unusual sight. His right eye was brown, like his mother, whilst his left was green, like his father. He was a product of their love, and it showed.

Before replying, Isaac powered down the tablet in his hands. He had been reading about the South Wars, and how they had grown to envelop most of the known world. Already millions had been killed, and the fight for the green zones where farming was still possible showed no signs of stopping.

For now, however, Paradisia had gone by unnoticed.

"I lost my partner today," Isaac said, trying to sound calm. In his heart he could still feel the pain of that loss, and he knew that it would take a while before the hurt fully left him.

Marie immediately stopped what she was doing and came over to him, placing her slender hand on his good shoulder.

"I'm sorry to hear that, my love… Was it anyone I knew?"

"No, it was a re-mech. His name was 261—his name was Frater. He died saving my life…"

"Oh Isaac…" Marie whispered, leaning forward and wrapping her arms around him. He felt her warmth against his back, carrying away his aches and pains.

"Thank you, my love… But there will be a time for mourning, and there will be a time for moving on. Enough about me… how was your day?"

Letting out a low sigh, Marie stood up and moved around to sit down across from him. It was a warm night, and they had chosen to leave the kitchen window open so that a cool breeze might flow in.

"It was rough, to tell you the truth. More than half of my shift didn't show up for work this morning, leaving me to somehow manage the clinic with only a handful of nurses. When I called them, they all said the same thing: the war has gotten too close, so they've taken their families and fled."

Isaac said nothing. He had faced that exact same problem at the station. Apparently a few of his fellow officers had been drafted to fight for the city militia, and the city council had ordered that any non-essential re-mechs be delivered for combat modifications. Those who resisted and tried to hold onto their re-mechs were branded Freedman sympathisers, whereupon the city council had them arrested and imprisoned without trial.

"Is it true? Has the war arrived in Paradisia?"

He had not seen Marie this worried since the doctor had explained to them that Alvin had been born with a weak heart. He remembered her standing vigil in the hospital, hoping that he would pull through. And then, the doctor had finally given them the good news…

"I don't know, my love… From what I've heard, the nearest conflict zone is still miles away. But such things can change quickly, and without warning…"

He had thought about leaving Paradisia, about abandoning his duty and simply taking his family and fleeing into the night, but he knew that Marie would never abandon her patients.

She was kind like that…

Suddenly standing, she moved towards Alvin's crib. There was a look in her eyes that he had never seen before.

Desperation.

"Maybe… maybe we should send Alvin to live with my parents for a while… at least until the war ends."

Rising, Isaac walked towards his wife. Together, they peered down at their son. He looked so helpless, so fragile, as if a strong gust might break him.

"Maybe… or maybe we could all go…"

Marie looked at him, but not with disappointment, as he might have expected.

Perhaps she had been thinking it too…

"I don't know, Isaac… I mean, they need me… they need us here. Could we really just up and run away from our responsibilities?"

Isaac thought about Chief Palmer, who had chosen money over loyalty. He thought about the clinic, where Marie worked long hours for little pay.

No, they had paid their dues to the city of Paradisia, and then some.

"It'll only be until the war—"

A sudden cacophony of noise drowned out the rest of his words. It rattled their small home, sending pots and jugs crashing to the floor. Alvin awoke with a fearsome cry, adding to the acoustic deluge.

"What's happening!?!" Marie screamed, struggling to be heard as she reached into the crib and withdrew their son.

Isaac, ears still ringing, made his way over to the window.

The quiet night from a few minutes earlier had disappeared, replaced by a scene of chaos and hellfire. He saw the tell-tale streaks of airborne missiles arc towards the city, and already a dozen plumes of burning smoke illuminated the horizon. In the distance, barely audible, he could make out the screams of panicking people.

"I don't think we have a choice in the matter anymore, my love," he said, fear entering his voice, "War has come to Paradisia…"

Chapter I

Refugee

93 days since the fall of Paradisia

Alvin was coughing again, just as he had for every night since leaving home. Isaac had burned through what little medication Marie had managed to steal for them, shortly after leaving Paradisia. She hadn't even had enough to take away her own pain, in the end…

But Isaac could not afford to think about his wife, may she spend eternity in paradise, not when he was so close to joining her. If he didn't find more medication or better yet, a doctor, Alvin would die without even celebrating his first birthday.

No… Isaac would ensure that his son survived… no matter the cost.

"Look, it's a fool-proof plan, and we need to do this!" cried Nathan, from his place at the head of their little group.

Two weeks ago, Isaac had stumbled upon a small band of refugees whilst looking for medication for Alvin. In exchange for sharing what little food he had left, he had been accepted into their group. There was safety in numbers, after all, and the group had helped him stay alive longer than if he had been on his own.

But now supplies were running low, and they were getting desperate.

Desperate enough to attempt the unthinkable…

Adding to their woes was the fact that Nathan's wife, Holly, was injured, and would not last much longer without medical treatment. However, the nearest facility was too far to travel on foot.

Hence… The Plan.

Short version: steal a car from a rich family and drive Holly to the clinic for treatment.

The long version, however, was a little more complicated…

"Nathan, are you sure you've thought this through?" asked Isaac, as he approached the stern-faced man. Apparently he had been a mechanic, before the war.

Now, he was a refugee on the run.

So many others, more than Isaac could waste time counting, were in similar positions. The warfront moved like a glacier, slowly and yet with an unstoppable fury. Fights erupted wherever two opposing groups collided, regardless of allegiance or nationality. On the larger scale, there were still countries who claimed to fight for their citizens, arguing that their people deserved the resources contained in the green zones.

Why *their* people and not those of their opponents was a question left to the spin-doctors and propaganda directors.

Sometimes, a victor would emerge, and an army would lay claim to the spoils of one of the remaining green zones.

But it never lasted long.

Either another army would arrive and challenge the victors for their prize, or the conquering army would realize that what they had fought for no longer existed.

For green zones cannot be called as such if there is nothing left inside them that is green.

"Yes. This is going to work," Nathan replied, as he scanned the horizon.

They were in a region which had once been known as the Forest of Tears. Now… well, perhaps it was time to use that name again.

All around them, towering above the road which winded through the thick trunks, were hundreds of trees. These trees, however, still had their leaves, a sign that the pollution which had brought the world into war had not made it this far… yet.

"What if the schedule has been changed?" asked Isaac, with more than a touch of hesitation. Three months ago, he had been an officer of the law, tasked with upholding the rules and regulations of society.

Now, he was on the verge of becoming a common thief.

"It hasn't. Kelser said that a car leaves the estate every week and returns the same day. Most likely the occupants have some kind of appointment to keep, despite the fact that the warfront is growing closer by the day. All we have to do is stop the car, remove the occupants and drive it out of here. With any luck, we'll make it to the hospital by sunrise, and Holly will receive the treatment she needs…"

Isaac heard the fear in Nathan's voice. From what he had heard from the others, Holly was everything to Nathan. If something were to happen to her…

"Still, even if we manage to get the car, won't the occupants come after us?"

Nathan shook his head.

"No, from what I've heard the usual occupants are a mother and her daughter, along with a single driver. The car itself is standard issue, and Kelser noted that there weren't any defensive measures in place."

"What about the re-mech Kelser saw when we arrived?" asked Isaac.

"It's not a concern. Kelser said that it's just a simple butler model, built to make the lives of the ultra-rich even more comfortable. And besides, it hasn't been seen recently, so there is always the chance that the owner of the estate sold it for scrap due to the war."

Isaac said nothing. Something told him not to discount the re-mech... Perhaps it was the part of him which had witnessed 26618-J, no, Frater, tossing perps around like they were made of straw.

But Nathan was right. It was a simple operation. Get in quick, remove the car's occupants with as little fuss as possible, and be over the horizon before any trouble showed up.

What could go wrong?

"Kelser, report," barked Nathan, as the scrawny man appeared.

Kelser took a moment to dislodge a few errant twigs and leaves before replying, "Good news and bad news, boss. Good news, everything appears to be running smoothly at the estate. Bad news, I've seen traces of Bloodhounds in the area..."

"Dammit!" Nathan cursed, lashing out with his foot at nothing in particular, as if he could someway kick the bad news away.

And the Bloodhounds were very bad news, Isaac knew, from past experiences.

They were a group of refugee hunters, preying on the weak and weary and taking everything they could get their hands on. They had appeared shortly after the fall of Paradisia, and they had made life even more unbearable for the survivors.

Isaac thought that he had outrun them...

"Maybe we should call this off, Nathan?" ventured Isaac.

"Why?" snarled Nathan.

"Well, we are about to pull off an operation that has the potential to become very noisy if things go wrong, not that I'm saying they will. But if the worst comes to pass, we could alert the Bloodhounds to our position, and if that happens... Holly won't be the only one in danger..."

Nathan glanced down, towards Alvin sleeping in Isaac's arms. His gaze lingered for a single moment, but it told volumes.

He believed that Isaac was more concerned about Alvin than Holly.

And he was right.

However, out loud, he said, "Have faith, Isaac. If we can do this quickly, the Bloodhounds will only become aware of our presence after we've already left the area. Now, do I have to remind you of the stakes involved?"

Isaac shook his head.

He knew the cost of failure.

He had paid it far too many times not to...

Alvin was coughing again. A short, raspy cough that he could somehow maintain for hours on end. Occasionally, he would suddenly stop, and Isaac would start fearing the worst.

But it was always the same: Alvin would have simply coughed himself into a fitful sleep.

Not that that did anything for Isaac's nerves.

The sooner they found a safe place, the better. However, up until now, it had always been the same.

Isaac would happen across an abandoned cabin or deserted rest stop and find shelter for a few days until inevitably either the warfront or the Bloodhounds arrived. And then it was the same: a mad dash into the night, leaving their newfound safety and supplies behind.

Alvin needed more than that. He needed a home.

Tucking his son back into his makeshift harness, he squared his shoulders. Ideally, he would have preferred to leave Alvin in the relative safety of the camp, but something told him that he might need to leave in a hurry.

If the operation went badly, and even if it went well, they would need to leave the area very quickly.

"Isaac, are you in position?" came a voice from his wrist-mounted communicator. Miraculously, it had survived the attack on Paradisia and the ensuing months of hardships.

"I'm here, Nathan."

"Good, remember, you are our last pair of eyes on the road before we activate the roadblock. If your warning comes too early, we might scare them off. And if it comes too late…"

"I know, Nathan."

"I hope you do. Holly doesn't have much time left…"

Isaac heard the hurt in Nathan's voice. He empathised with the man; after all, he had experienced the same thing when he had lost Marie.

He had been holding her body in the rain, thinking of simply joining her, when Alvin had started crying… If not for the fact that he would have left Alvin alone, perhaps he would have simply let death claim him.

No. His son needed him. That was all the motivation he needed.

"It's going to be okay, Nathan," Isaac lied, "She'll be in the hospital soon, so don't worry."

Nathan did not reply for several seconds.

Eventually, with a weary voice, he whispered, "Right… you're right… Okay, stay sharp. The car should be arriving any minute now."

The green light on Isaac's wrist faded, signifying that Nathan had ended the call. Returning his focus to the road before him, he strained his senses, trying to pick up any sign of the approaching vehicle.

His eyes scanned the tar for any reflections caused by light striking metal.

His ears strained to pick up the faint sound of a car in motion.

His nose sniffed for the tell-tale scent of exhaust fumes.

Wait…

What was that smell?

Not exhaust, that was for sure.

Something... sharper?

More odious... more noxious...

Smoke.

But not from a forest fire.

Not from a city on fire either, which he sadly knew all too well.

Cigarette smoke.

But that was impossible. No one in the group smoked. No one had that luxury.

Then who?

And then Isaac saw him. The smoking man.

He was standing a few feet away, back turned towards Isaac. From his ragged, ill-fitting clothes Isaac knew that he wasn't one of them.

And he wasn't a refugee either...

A Bloodhound.

Silently, Isaac unsheathed the Solar Staff strapped to his leg. With a single push of the recessed button, it extended to its full size. The man hadn't noticed him yet, so there was still a chance to end this quickly.

A single strike would bring the refugee hunter down silently.

There was still a chance to complete the operation and save Holly.

Moving closer, he raised his weapon. He needed to be as close as possible, in order to ensure a clean hit. Any struggle could alert the approaching car and doom the plan.

Closer now, moving so silently as to be inaudible.

He hoped.

The Bloodhound, a middle-aged man with an unkempt appearance, still hadn't noticed him.

What was he doing here?

Taking a smoke break? Or watching the road for the same car that Nathan was waiting for?

If it was the latter, then they were in trouble...

Closer still. He was almost in reach.

He could do this.

Raising the Solar Staff, he prepared to strike.

And then, the unthinkable happened.

Alvin started coughing.

"What the hell?" the Bloodhound uttered, turning around. And then he saw Isaac, and everything truly went wrong.

Isaac moved to strike, but he had taken too long to react. The man dodged out of the way, screaming curses and fumbling at his belt for his weapon: a nasty looking knife.

Isaac struck again, this time striking the side of a tree. The concentrated electrical discharge blew off part of the bark, showering the area in debris. Isaac was aware of someone speaking from his wrist, asking for an update. At the same time, he could hear something at the edge of his hearing, coming closer.

But in that moment, none of that mattered. Isaac was fighting for his life, and the life of his son.

With a cry, he swept the Solar Staff in a wide arc, catching the Bloodhound on the side of his knee. It wasn't enough to take him down, but it did give Isaac an opening. Moving quickly, Isaac leapt forward, bringing the weapon around overhead. It connected with the man's shoulder, and a heartbeat later, it discharged, sending enough electricity through the unfortunate man's body to render him unconscious.

Like a puppet whose strings had been suddenly severed, the man fell.

Isaac stood, panting, trying to process what had happened.

And then he became aware of a sound.

Or rather, the lack of one.

Alvin had stopped coughing.

Quickly sheathing his Solar Staff, he reached around behind him and brought his son around.

Thankfully, his son was still sleeping peacefully.

A moment later, he looked up, just in time to see a car speeding past.

Bringing up his wrist, he screamed, "DO IT NOW!"

But it was too late, he already knew...

He had failed.

Isaac made his way to the road in a daze. How had everything gone so wrong?

The scene before him looked as if it were from the war itself.

A car lay before him.

No... half of a car.

The plan had been to cut down one of the trees so that it fell across the road, forcing the driver to stop but giving them plenty of time to see the blockage in the road.

Because of Isaac's delayed warning, the tree had been felled too late. Instead of having plenty of time to react to the sudden impediment, the driver had been unable to react to the sudden roadblock. From what he could tell, the car had slammed into the tree trunk without even having the time to slow down.

The driver and front passenger had both been killed on impact.

Those deaths were his fault, he knew.

But the worst part of it all was the screaming.

Nathan, knees on the tarred ground, screaming a wordless cry to the heavens. The car would carry no one now.

And the screams of a child, coming from the wreckage, alternatively crying for her mother and for her own ruined body.

Isaac knew, in his heart, that his explanation would make no difference.

Nathan would not care that a Bloodhound had been the cause of the delay, if he even believed anything that Isaac told him.

He would not care that it had been an accident, or that Isaac was sorry.

He would not care about anything, other than the fact that he was going to lose his wife...

They left the wreck, moving quickly. Many of the group had wanted to try and help the injured child, but Nathan had shouted them down. He had stated, whilst crying tears of pre-grief, that the girl's re-mech would have been alerted as soon as the car crashed. On top of that, the Bloodhounds would be making their way towards the commotion.

Either way, they couldn't stay.

So they left, a broken group following a broken man.

Only Isaac looked back.

Only Isaac saw the re-mech arrive.

He was roughly seven feet tall and was bedecked in white and blue paint. He moved with caution, surveying the wreck.

"Fiddy…" came a weak voice, emanating from the trapped, wounded girl.

"*I am here, Elizabeth,*" the re-mech replied, reaching into the wreckage and withdrawing his injured charge.

"Please… help mommy…" the girl said.

"*Scanning. Scanning. No additional life signs detected. Hazard level high. Spinal cord injury detected. Computing course to nearest emergency healthcare facility. Please hold tight, Elizabeth, I will be accelerating.*"

The girl did not answer. Perhaps she couldn't…

The re-mech, after taking one last look at the carnage, took off into the woods.

Isaac could only offer up a quick prayer for the girl's safety…

And a prayer for forgiveness… for the lives he had ruined due to his actions…

Chapter II

Survivor

96 days since the fall of Paradisia

Isaac ran through the night, chased by madmen.

Everything had fallen apart.

He hadn't eaten in two days, giving what little he had to Alvin. The boy was still coughing, and he had grown even paler since leaving Nathan's group.

But how could he have stayed, after what happened?

He could still visualize Nathan's face the night of the failed operation. The man had stared at nothing, as the rest of the group tried to comfort him. Holly had passed away a day later, screaming in agony.

The following morning, Nathan had picked up her body and walked off into the mist. He had never returned.

The group, leaderless and hunted by the Bloodhounds, had not lasted the day. One by one, they had left, believing that they would be safer on their own. Isaac knew, however, that they were simply making themselves easy targets for the Bloodhounds.

But he hadn't stopped them.

He doubted they would have listened to him, even if he had.

They blamed him, he knew, for everything.

He was the reason Holly had died. He was the reason Nathan had disappeared. He was the reason the Bloodhounds were hunting them.

Every slight, every grievance, every pang of hunger, he found, could somehow be traced back to him.

He had become a pariah overnight, and he knew that it wouldn't be long before they turned on him. Perhaps they would try to punish him, or harm Alvin, or even hand him over to the Bloodhounds in exchange for mercy.

Well, he wasn't going to give them that chance.

He had left, slipping away into the night, unseen and unmissed.

And now karma had caught up to him.

He had left the Forest of Tears behind in his flight, eventually arriving at the Silver Mountains. Decades ago, they had been home to countless mines.

Now, they lay empty.

The South Wars had started three years ago, however even before they began, the world had been suffering. The Creed Event had occurred almost a decade prior, releasing massive amounts of concentrated pollution into the atmosphere and leading to the destruction of the largest city in the world, Pure. Humanity had been enjoying the technological fruits of the Quantum Age for over a century, but they had been blind to its cost.

Factories spewing poison into the air, manufacturing plants emptying runoff into rivers and lakes, and re-mech manufactories discarding scrap into fragile ecosystems... all of the harmful side-effects of progress had been kept hidden for decades.

Until the Creed Event started a chain reaction that quickly enveloped the world.

And now, to add to humanity's troubles, the greatest war imaginable had erupted over the conquest of the rapidly disappearing green zones.

Isaac would have wept at the senselessness of it all, but he had to conserve his fluid levels.

The small fire gave off preciously little heat, but it was enough to warm Isaac's frozen feet. He couldn't afford to make it any bigger, lest he draw the attention of the Bloodhounds. They had been chasing him ever since he left Nathan's group, always keeping up with him no matter how hard he tried to lose them.

They must have been desperate, in their own way. But he had nothing they wanted, and when they found that out they might turn to violence in their frustration.

And he couldn't let that happen.

He had made a promise, in Marie's final moments that he would keep Alvin safe. No matter what.

Even if death claimed him, even if he lost everything else, he would ensure that his son would live on.

That was his promise. His one and only conviction. His reason for living on, even when he so desperately wanted to see his wife again.

He would not fail her.

He would not fail Alvin.

No matter the cost.

The Bloodhound sniffed the air, like an animal tracking the scent of its prey. The man had almost stumbled upon Isaac's makeshift camp whilst he had been asleep.

Only Alvin's coughing had saved them.

If not for his son's ailment, he wouldn't have woken up early and taken his son to the nearby stream to soothe his raw throat.

If not for his son's condition, the man would have captured Isaac and done terrible things to the two of them. For the first time since Alvin had started coughing all those weeks ago, Isaac was glad that he was sick…

Eventually, the man turned away and left.

How many more close calls could Isaac survive? He hoped to find a proper shelter before he found the answer to that question…

The cabin was alright, if one could ignore the massive hole in the east wall and the fact that the floor had more gaps than planks. However, with the storm rolling in, Isaac hadn't had the luxury of being picky.

So now he was perched at the edge of a precipice, both literally and figuratively, as he waited out the worst of the storm. The cabin, which had seemingly been used by an old prospector looking for a new silver seam, had been built on solid ground.

However, at some point in the past a landslide had collapsed part of the cliff beneath it, leaving it jutting out over the abyss.

It wasn't exactly the safest shelter in the world.

But the alternative was facing the storm without any protection, and he couldn't risk exposing Alvin to anything that might weaken his already fragile immune system.

So he had no choice but to place his back against the sturdiest wall of the cabin, hold Alvin tight to his chest, and try and get some sleep…

I float in the void, unaided and alone.

Before me lie thousands of coloured orbs, hanging unsupported in the darkness. I have been here before. Every time I've closed my eyes in the weeks since losing Marie, I've found myself in this place.

But this time is different.

Normally, one of the orbs moves towards me, and I see a vision of happier times.

The day I met Marie.

The afternoon when I finally worked up the courage to propose.

The night when Alvin was born.

But no orb moves towards me.

Instead, there is a figure hanging in the void.

A blond man wrapped in a cloak of emerald and trimmed with gold, beckons me closer.

"Who are you?"

"Just an observer," *the man replies, flashing a sad smile.*

"An observer of what?"

"Everything. For now, it is all I can do. One day, when the time is right, I will take action."

"Who are you?"

The man seems to think for a moment, before answering, **"I am the Avatar of the Land, although I do not think that will bring you any closer to understanding what I am."**

"You're right, I have no idea what that means…"

"Nor should you. Unfortunately, your role in this story is a supporting one. However, without you, the chains will never be broken. For this, you are to be commended."

"What story? What chains? Will you please speak sense?!?"

"I have said too much already…" *the mysterious man says, turning away,* **"Perhaps it is because I pity you, Husband of None. Your story is not a happy one by any measure. Please, take comfort in that it is a necessary suffering…"**

"Wait, what does that mean?!?"

But he is already gone, leaving me alone and more confused than ever.

However, a moment later, I hear his voice, faint and indistinct, as if it has been whispered from a place unreachable by normal means…

"Awaken, Breaker of Chains, and save your son…"

Isaac's eyes snapped open just in time to witness a tableau of horror.

While he had slept, the storm had weakened the already precariously held supports keeping the cabin from tumbling over the edge. That, on its own, was worrying enough already without the sight of Alvin crawling towards the other side of the cabin.

"ALVIN!" Isaac cried, springing to his feet. However, in doing so, he shifted the careful balance that the cabin needed to stay up.

In slow motion, the cabin started listing to the side.

Towards the abyss.

"NO!" Isaac screamed as he dove forward, towards Alvin.

He managed to reach the boy in ten steps, wrapping him up in a tight embrace. The cabin, now fully committed to its fatal plunge, shifted beneath his feet, carrying him backwards. He wobbled on his feet, struggling to stay upright. If he fell here, then he would break his promise to Marie…

No, he wouldn't let that happen!

With every ounce of his remaining strength, he forced his body forward.

One step.

Another.

Slowly, he made his way towards the distant door. Beyond it laid the rain swept cliff, and salvation.

The storm, previously quiet, suddenly roared back to life. If he had been superstitious, he would have sworn that it was purposefully trying to kill him…

But that was insane.

Storms were forces of nature, not the machinations of a devious entity…

Right?

Shaking his head free from such delusional thoughts, he refocused his attention on escaping the cabin in one piece.

It wasn't an easy task...

But he would do it.

For his son.

Another step forward.

And another.

One more just for good measure.

He was almost there.

Just a little bit further.

Come on!

Alvin was silent, which was either a blessing or a worry, but Isaac didn't have any time to figure out which.

Instead, he focused all of his energy on escaping the tilted cabin.

However, when he was still three steps away from the exit, he felt the cabin finally give in to gravity's seductive allure. It shifted beneath him, heading over the edge.

He had no choice but to leap, Alvin in hand, for the rain soaked cliffside. As he flew through the downpour, a bolt of lightning illuminated the scene, showing just how far the cabin had shifted.

And then he hit the cliff, and he ceased caring about that stupid cabin.

Isaac lay still for a long time, trying and failing to catch his breath. Alvin had started coughing again, which in this case was a good thing.

After all, you couldn't cough if you were dead...

Eventually, two things happened: the storm abated; and Isaac rose to his feet.

For the moment, he was safe. Wet, sleep-deprived and stressed, but alive.

However, just as he was trying to remain optimistic, he heard a commotion from down below. From the sounds of the voices coming up from the bottom of the cliff, the Bloodhounds had caught up to him.

And they had found his pack amongst the wreckage of the cabin.

Which had the last of his food and water.

Great.

Shaking his head, he clutched Alvin tight, trying to warm the shivering boy, and resumed his journey towards safety...

They caught up to him just as the sun's light returned to the world.

Five men, wielding clubs and knives. They did not look like they wanted to chat.

Isaac had run out of room, literally. He was standing with his back towards a steep embankment that stretched off in either direction. He was trapped...

He had only two options left to him: surrender, and beg for mercy.

Or fight.

Unsheathing his Solar Staff, he made his decision.

"Are you insane?" the apparent leader of the men asked, "You're outnumbered!"

Isaac nodded, saying, "Yes, but only for now. As soon as I knock out your friends, it will be a fair fight!"

And then he moved, stealing the initiative. He raced forward, Solar Staff still in its compressed form. They watched him with bemusement, no doubt believing themselves untouchable.

Well, prepare to be proven wrong...

The first man in his path towered over him. He was built like a wall, and had clearly benefitted from eating the stolen rations of those he had hunted. He was wielding a club made of twisted metal and wrapped oak, which looked like it could split a skull with one fearsome swing.

Not that Isaac was interested in testing that theory...

The man, with a hearty laugh, swung the club, aiming for Isaac's unprotected face.

Isaac, however, had already moved, ducking beneath the man's line of sight and finding an uninsulated chest waiting for him.

The Solar Staff sang its sweet song, and the man fell.

"Son of a- the leader began, but Isaac was already moving onwards to his next target.

"GET HIM!" another Bloodhound screamed, as the remaining three men rushed forward.

Only then did Isaac extend the Solar Staff to its full glory. Swinging it in a complete arc, he forced the men back. Not for the first time did Isaac thank the captain for forcing him to take that advanced self-defence course.

Eventually, one of the Bloodhounds grew bold and tried to rush forward, knife falling in a downward slash that could sever an artery.

Isaac stepped back as he came forward, before suddenly spinning around, catching the man on the side of the head with the Solar Staff. It discharged, and he too fell.

"ARGH!" the leader cried, clearly frustrated. In less than a minute his five to one advantage had rapidly disappeared.

"THAT'S IT!!!" one of the other Bloodhounds cried, dropping his club.

For a moment, hope bloomed in Isaac's mind. Perhaps his two comrades would quickly follow suit, having come to the appropriate realization that Isaac was proving to be more troublesome than he was surely worth.

And then he saw the gun.

In an instant, his hope withered. The Bloodhound had come to a realization, true, but not the one Isaac had been hoping for.

Instead, it looked as though the man had stumbled upon a fundamental truth: it is easier to loot a corpse than a highly dangerous adversary.

Shit.

Isaac closed his eyes. Just like every other time he had faced death in the past three months, his mind sought Marie's memory. In the end, he wanted his final thoughts to be of her...

"*Alvin... I'm sorry...*" he thought, feeling the small warmth strapped to his back squirm. At least his son would feel no pain...

"What the—" he heard the leader say.

And then he heard the gunshot.

And another.

And then he heard the man emptying the entire cartridge.

He was only one man, so why were they wasting all of their precious ammo on him?

And… why didn't he feel any pain?

Slowly, he opened his eyes, dreading what he might see. However, the scene before him did not evoke dread. Instead, it brought about… confusion?

Standing before him was a re-mech. Eight feet tall, blue eyes and a faded red paintjob.

Why was it here?

The three remaining Bloodhounds had clearly tried to attack it, perhaps out of suicidal curiosity, and had paid the price. They lay on the ground before it, arms twisted at odd, unnatural angles. However, they were still breathing.

Re-mechs were forbidden from killing humans, after all.

"**Worry not, friend, I am here to help,**" the re-mech said, turning towards Isaac.

"Uh… thanks?"

"**It is a pleasure to be of service, although I have been instructed by Rend not to say that anymore… Regardless, I understand that you are in need of assistance. If you would allow me, I will take you to a safe place.**"

Isaac could not believe his ears. First, the re-mech had saved his life, and now it wanted to solve all of his other problems…

"Well aren't you just a deus ex machina…" Isaac said, mostly to himself.

"**I am not a god, sir, despite my appearance. I am called 564- No, my name is Uther. Please, if you would allow me to assist you…**"

Isaac took a moment to think. He could stay, surrounded by injured Bloodhounds that would soon awaken and call for backup. Or he could go with a friendly re-mech who was offering him everything he needed and more.

It didn't take him long to reach a decision.

"Thank you, for your assistance," he said, reaching for Uther's outstretched hand. The re-mech lifted him high into the air with what seemed like minimal effort, before lowering him onto one of his broad shoulder plates. As soon as Isaac was settled, Uther set off, towards the embankment. Without slowing, he leapt high into the air, easily clearing the muddy wall.

Together, they sped across the landscape, heading for destinations unknown…

Chapter III

Guest

97 days since the fall of Paradisia

After hours of travelling across several nondescript foothills, Uther finally came to rest, lowering Isaac gently to the icy surface.

"Where are we?" Isaac asked, staring at the scene before him. They had come to a stop a few feet away from an expansive glacial lake, beyond which lay the

entrance to a mine embedded in the mountainside. The entrance, however, was blocked by dozens of fallen boulders, most likely the result of some ancient cave-in.

"**A safe place,**" Uther said, gesturing to the desolate scene, "**This was once the entrance to the largest silver mine in the region, now it lies abandoned. The pollutants from the mining, together with the ensuing silver smelting and forging, contributed to the global pollution problem that even now plagues humanity. It was closed soon after the silver seams ran dry, but my friends and I have found a new use for it.**"

"Your friends? You mean your masters?"

Uther did not answer for several long seconds.

"**In a sense, but probably not the one you are accustomed to. Now, let us go inside and find your son some much needed help.**"

"But how are we going to get inside? The entrance is blocked."

"**Yes, that is how it appears to be,**" Uther said, walking forward.

A few minutes later, they rounded the frozen lake and arrived at the obstructed entryway. Uther, without stopping, reached forward with his four-fingered hands and pushed the boulders out of the way.

Surprisingly, it did not seem to take much effort at all.

"Fake rocks?" Isaac asked, with wonder in his voice.

"**A simple deception, but an effective one. Most people see what they want to see, and do not look further.**"

"And for those that do?"

"We close their eyes for them".

Isaac wisely chose not to ask for clarification. It wouldn't be a great idea to antagonize his saviour.

Leaving the illusive entrance behind, they headed deeper into the mine. Immediately, Isaac noticed small details that indicated that the mine was not as abandoned as he had assumed.

Dozens of pipes running overhead carried meltwater further inside, whilst air pumps brought fresh air from hidden vents. All of this was illuminated by dozens of wall-mounted lamps that drew their power from hidden generators, if the ever-present hum in the air was what he thought it was.

"What is this place?"

"**We call it the Argentum. It is our home, and our place of refuge.**"

"And who is _we?_"

"**You will find out shortly,**" Uther replied cryptically.

A few minutes later, the tunnel started to widen, growing exponentially taller and wider every few feet. Soon, Isaac found himself staring at a massive chasm, a remnant of the old mine's central chamber.

Where once there had been miners, mine carts and equipment, now stood… a town.

However, it was unlike any town Isaac had ever seen.

The people wore a mishmash of clothes and carried an assortment of tools and weapons. No person was dressed alike, and yet they all bore the same expression: determination.

This wasn't some refugee camp made up of desperate souls.

This was a place of purpose and focus.

But what were they so focused on, aside from surviving?

As they made their way into the town square, Isaac noticed another oddity. Almost everyone greeted Uther by name.

Not with disrespect or in a demeaning way, but as one friend might call out to another.

Isaac had never seen it before. Even 26618-J... even Frater, had never received so much as a 'hello' from anyone other than his partner.

"What do we have here, Uther?" one of the townspeople asked, stopping to take Isaac in.

"***A refugee and his son. I was scouting our northern border when I came across him being attacked by the Bloodhounds. I felt that rescuing him was something that Rend would have wanted...***"

"I suppose he would have approved, but I'm not sure that Dulcie will. We already have a lot of mouths to feed, and adding two more won't make life around here any easier..." the woman said, although not in an unkind tone. It sounded as if she was simply stating the facts.

"***I know, Louisa, but I could not leave them to die. Things might be different now, but I will always try and help those in need, just like I did before.***"

"Very well. If that is what you chose to do, then I won't say anything further. However, I would suggest taking them to Dulcie before you do anything else. She will want to know about this."

"***Understood. I shall do as you suggest.***"

The redheaded woman nodded before continuing on her way, leaving Uther and Isaac alone once more.

*

A short while and a few more twisting tunnels later, Isaac stood before a small room cut into the rock. Although he could not fully see its interior, it did not appear to be any different from the dozens of rooms that they had passed on their way to it, and yet somehow Isaac could sense that it was special.

"***Dulciana, I seek your council,***" Uther announced, in a booming voice that reverberated off every angled surface.

A moment later, a feminine voice beckoned them in, saying, "Enter, Uther Fleetfoot."

Gesturing for Isaac to follow him, Uther entered the room, bowing slightly so that he could fit.

Inside Isaac found a sparsely decorated apartment and a woman with skin of charcoal and eyes of fire sitting on a wooden chair.

"I take it that you are Dulciana?" Isaac asked, somewhat nervously.

She nodded, curls falling to frame her slender face, saying, "I am Dulciana, or Dulcie to those I call friend. Time will tell which you will use to address me."

Isaac shivered, despite the mine's well-maintained warmth.

"What is this place? Who were those people? And why have I been brought here?"

"So many questions, stranger, and yet I know that they are all important to you. However, before I can answer them, I would like to know your name."

"Ah, sorry…" Isaac said, slightly embarrassed. It seemed that it only took three months of harsh living to forget the manners his parents had taught him all those years ago.

"My name is Isaac Gordon, and this is my son, Alvin," he said, reaching around to bring Alvin out of his harness. The boy had not made a sound in hours, and yet the absence of his frequent coughing somehow did not reassure Isaac.

In fact, it seemed as though Alvin had simply run out of energy and could not muster up a single feeble cough.

Hopefully, Dulciana would be able to provide some kind of medical treatment, or at least point Isaac in the right direction.

"Well met, Isaac. It is clear to see that your son is sick, but we will take him under our care… owing to a few conditions, of course."

"I'll do anything," Isaac said, and he meant it.

"I see. I had hoped that you would say that. Now, as to the answers you seek. This, as I'm sure you have been told, is the Argentum. It is both our base of operations and our home, and so far, it has served us well. The people you met on your way in are mostly refugees from the war, like yourself, along with a few who have similar goals to us. We are… well, we call ourselves the People's Army, and we are the ones fighting for those who cannot fight for themselves."

"I've never heard of you," Isaac responded, speaking truthfully.

"I am happy to hear that," Dulciana replied with a smile, "We do not want ourselves to be known, not yet. For now, we are still small in number, and can only operate in a limited facility. Eventually, once our numbers have grown, we will spread across this war-torn world and make things right."

"For the people affected by the war?" Isaac ventured.

Dulciana hesitated for a split-second before nodding.

"So that is where we are and what you are, but you still haven't said why I'm here."

Dulciana chuckled before replying, "We are always on the lookout for new recruits. From the way you hold yourself and judging by that well-used Solar Staff in your possession, I would estimate that you are some kind of fighter. A deserter from the army, perhaps?"

Isaac shook his head, saying "I am no deserter. I was a police officer in the town of Paradisia, but the town was destroyed three months ago. And… you can't be a police officer without a town to, well, police."

"I am sorry to hear that, Officer Gordon. Sadly, there are many here with similar stories to tell. So many… far too many, have lost everything due to the war. We are simply trying to save who we can, you understand. So, I offer you this deal: fight for the People's Army, use your skills for the betterment of the world, and we will do whatever we can to keep your son safe and healthy."

Isaac pretended to take his time thinking. Just as he had learnt from courting Marie, it didn't pay to appear too eager.

After a reasonable amount of time, he sighed and said, "Very well. I will fight for you… in exchange for my son's wellbeing."

He wondered if Marie would be proud of him…

"I am happy to hear that, Isaac. Welcome to the People's Army!" Dulciana said, rising to her feet.

"**Welcome, friend,**" Uther said, from the room's entrance.

"Now, there is still much for us to discuss, but I believe that before that, we should see to your son. Uther, would you mind showing our newest recruit to Jessibel?"

"**Of course, Dulcie,**" Uther said, bowing ever so slightly.

Turning to Isaac, he said, "**If you would follow me once more?**"

Together, they left the room. However, as he walked away, Isaac could not shake the feeling that Dulciana was still keeping secrets from him. For now, he would follow her, but if her actions ended up endangering Alvin…

Well, hopefully it would not come to that.

"So how did a re-mech come to work for the People's Army, Uther? Is Dulciana your master?"

Again, Uther seemed to shy away from the question. However, after a few moments of silence, he answered, "**I… I used to work for a care centre for the elderly in a small town to the west of here. When the warfront arrived, I tried to evacuate as many as I could carry…**"

Uther's voice took on a darker tone, as if there was an undercurrent of anger lying buried beneath his words.

But re-mechs had not been programmed to feel anger, so that was impossible… right?

"**For a few days, we travelled as refugees. A small number of the centre's staff had come with me, but one by one they abandoned their charges and put their own needs ahead of those they had sworn to care for. Obviously, my programming forbid me from following suit, not that I ever would have done so…**"

"I am… sorry to hear that…" Isaac said, as the memories of his own desperate flight rose in his mind. In the first few days after the attack on Paradisia, he too had done things that ran counter to everything he had believed in. Anything to keep Alvin safe…

He was not proud of his actions from back then. But he and his son had survived, even when so many others hadn't.

"**Eventually, we reached the end of the road. The elderly could go no further, and I could not care for them and protect them at the same time. We were attacked by the Bloodhounds, sensing an easy victory, and were almost overrun. It was then that Dulcie appeared, and she saved all of those who remained. She brought us here, tended to the human's needs, and showed me a new path. I have been indebted to her ever since…**"

"I see… It is good to hear that even in this age of selfishness; there still exist good people who put the needs of others above their own."

Uther gave him a sidelong glance, appearing to re-evaluate him, before replying, **"Indeed. There are some very... remarkable people... around here. In time, I hope that you will come to see them as your family, just as I have."**

Isaac said nothing. It was still too soon after the loss of his last 'family' to think of such things.

But nobody knew what the future held...

Soon, they came to a large opening which had obviously once housed the mine's infirmary. From the looks of it, not much had changed, save for the linen.

"**This is the sick bay, where your son will be well cared for,**" Uther said, with a note of pride in his robotic voice.

"Thank you, Uther, for everything," Isaac said, finally realized just how close he had come to losing Alvin. He had been running on a mixture of adrenaline and stimulants for what seemed like weeks, and now that he had finally found a place of safety... a place where Alvin could be seen to... he felt like collapsing on the spot.

"Well met, Uther, collector of broken things!" cried an exuberant voice from the back of the sick bay. A heartbeat later, a young woman, dark of hair but young of heart, appeared, holding a clipboard.

"**Well met, Jessibel Jones, fixer of broken things,**" Uther replied, with a small chuckle.

In that moment, Isaac realized that he had never heard a re-mech laugh before.

It was a surprisingly lovely sound.

"So, what do you have for me today, Uther? I just finished patching up that broken arm that Ted received on your latest mission, and Ian is still recovering from the pneumonia he caught following you through that bog."

"**Two new admissions today, Doctor. This is Isaac Gordon, who is suffering from fatigue, sleep deprivation and dehydration. His son, Alvin Gordon, is worse off, however, and is suffering from an unknown ailment. I hope that you will be able to help them.**"

"Well, firstly, I never completed my training in lieu of the hospital being blown up, so just call me Jessibel. And secondly, I will do my best, but in the future, bring me something easier... like a splinter that needs removing..."

Uther chuckled once more, sounding like a chainsaw filled with helium gas, before replying, **"I shall do my best, Jessibel. Now, I must take my leave, as I have been away from my post for far too long."**

"Go well, Uther, and may your feet carry you to those who need you. And please, if your feet carry you past our illustrious leader, please tell him to take it easy. I know that he is working hard on his little project, but even he needs a break now and again..."

Uther bowed slightly, saying, **"I will try, but you know how stubborn he can be."**

With that, he said his goodbyes and departed, leaving Isaac in Jessibel's care.

Isaac followed Jessibel deeper into the sick bay, passing rows of injured and sickly people. The number present was dishearteningly large...

Seeing his expression, Jessibel sighed and said, "I know, it looks pretty bad. Honestly, it can be quite overwhelming, especially for me, but we do our best. If we had more resources and weren't using decades old equipment, we could probably do more, but as it is we're just too understaffed and unequipped to help everyone. I mean, I'm the only one here with any real medical training, and my second-in-command was a veterinarian's assistant before the war!"

"You're doing your best with what little you have," Isaac said, "I can respect that."

In a small voice, Jessibel replied, "Thank you, Isaac, I can't tell you how much I appreciate your kindness. Now, let's get you and your son sorted!"

Jessibel led them into a small room just to the side of the main sick bay. Inside lay a small cot and a worn yet comfortable looking rocking chair. Marie had had one very similar, before their house had gone up in flames.

"I'm going to run a few tests on your son, and try and discover what we're dealing with here. In the meantime, I'm going to hook you up to a drip so that you can recover some of your strength. Dulcie is going to be needed all of her soldiers at full force soon, after all."

"Thank you," Isaac said, taking a seat in the rocking chair at Jessibel's insistence, "But I haven't been told anything about that..."

Jessibel paused for a moment, looking guilty.

"Don't worry; I'm sure Dulcie will brief you soon. In the meantime, we need to focus on getting you and your son better."

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Over the next hour, Jessibel worked with Alvin, taking samples and running tests. During that time, Isaac hovered over her shoulder, filled with nervous energy.

Until she ordered him to sit and not move until she said so.

Eventually, she completed her diagnostic screening, and after laying Alvin into the cot, came over with a worried expression.

"Bad news?" Isaac asked, fearing the worst.

Jessibel nodded, saying, "Mr Gordon, I'm afraid to say that your son is very sick. Aside from malnutrition and dehydration, he has a pretty serious chest infection. I can treat him, but it will take time... and even then there is a chance he won't make it... I'm sorry..."

Isaac took a deep breath before answering, "Thank you for your honesty, Jessibel. To be truthful, I suspected as much, but I didn't want to think about it. His mother, may she find paradise, told me that he was born with a weak heart. But... I know that he's a fighter, like me, so I will place my faith in both him and in you. Whatever it costs, whatever it takes... please... try and heal him..."

Isaac felt the tears in his eyes, and yet he did not wipe them away. He had gone far too long without shedding any tears. Even when Marie had died, he had been too busy trying to keep Alvin safe to properly mourn her.

And now those delayed tears poured out, without stopping.

After promising him that she would do her best, Jessibel left him to his grief.

Through the tears, Isaac sought out his son, reaching for him and bringing him in close. Alvin, perhaps sensing his father's anguish, began to cry as well.

And so, father and son shed the tears that were well and truly overdue... for the wife and mother they had lost... and the uncertain future they now faced...

Chapter IV

Soldier

139 days since the fall of Paradisia

Uther and Isaac lay motionless in the shade of the withering tree. Their eyes, digital and organic, were both entirely focused on the grey building before them. They had managed to find a secluded hill that provided excellent views of the plateau.

The setting sun cast long shadows across the land, draping it in alternating patches of light and darkness. They had parked their Voxner van nearby, carefully camouflaged to prevent detection. Luckily the People's Army had inherited a fleet of such vehicles when they took control of the Argentum.

The building was only one part of a larger complex that ran across the length of the plateau. On every side steep cliffs made for natural deterrents, whilst chain-link fences and sensors provided proof of man-made defences.

It was not a welcoming place, to say the least.

And Isaac was supposed to break into it.

"***Uther to command, we are in position,***" Uther announced, mostly for Isaac's benefit as he was capable of sending messages without making a sound.

A moment later, Isaac's wrist-mounted communicator crackled to life, saying, "Isaac, remember the mission. Six teams of two, each with their own directive. You and Uther need to make your way towards the communications block, located on the north side of the plateau. As soon as you cut their communication, the extraction teams can go in and free the hostage. Do you understand?"

"I do, but what I don't understand is why you won't tell me the identity of the hostage? I mean, he must be someone pretty important to cause an insurgent group to overrun an entire army research base to get to."

In an ordinary time, the army would have mobilized en-masse in order to reclaim a captured base and secure any valuable research. But this was wartime, and the army apparently had other, higher priority targets that needed their attention.

"That is need to know information, Isaac, and you do not need to know. Focus on your task, complete it without raising the alarm, and then we will speak about your role in this organization. Dulciana out."

The communicator went silent a moment later.

Isaac let out a deep sigh, before resuming his observations. He had been in the People's Army for almost two months, but in that time he had done nothing of importance. He had helped procure supplies, cook food and patrol the outskirts of the Argentum with Uther, but he had yet to see any action.

Until now.

Even without being told, Isaac knew what this mission represented: a test of his worthiness.

Pass, and he might be allowed to assist on more missions.

Fail, and he would be ice fishing until his last breath.

Not that he particularly cared, one way or another, but there was no way of knowing how long Dulciana's generosity would last. She had kept Isaac fed and provided him with shelter, but if he could not prove his worth, then she might just force him to leave the Argentum.

And then he would be back where he started: homeless and hungry.

No. Alvin already looked better after his treatment at the hands of Jessibel. Isaac could not afford to lose his place in the People's Army... no matter what.

"***Are you ready to move, Isaac?***" Uther asked, rising to his feet.

"I'm right behind you," Isaac replied, following the re-mech. In the past few weeks, Isaac had discovered something: Uther was unlike any re-mech he had ever met.

He told jokes, for starters, although they weren't what Isaac would consider 'funny'.

He also kept secrets, which was supposed to be impossible.

But every time Isaac had asked Uther about Dulciana, the People's Army and their mysterious, unseen leader 'Rend', Uther had dodged the question.

He was so unlike Frater, despite them being the same type of machine... that it begged the question... why?

However, that line of inquiry would have to be put aside for now.

It was time to get to work.

They silently made their way closer to the plateau, moving from cover to cover and never lingering for longer than a second.

Their mission was the first that needed to be completed, after which the other teams could move in. Only once the communications were down could the People's Army risk a rescue. If Isaac and Uther failed, enemy reinforcements could overwhelm the lightly armed teams, and everything would be lost.

Their destination lay above them, sitting at the edge of a steep wall of rock which ringed the plateau on three sides. It looked... imposing.

Soon, they came to an exposed section of pipe. It was an outflow system, designed to deposit waste water into the ground.

Apparently recycling had not been at the top of the army's priority list. Not that Isaac had been told anything about them, except for the fact that they were extremely dangerous and that if encountered, he should flee instead of fight.

But if they were powerful enough to get to a VIP inside an army base, then they were certainly not to be trifled with.

Which begged the question: why were the People's Army doing this, instead of the regular army? What could be more important than this?

Arriving at the grate which covered the pipe, Isaac motioned for Uther to step forward. The re-mech followed his suggestion, reaching forward and grabbing hold of the steel lattice with both hands. With an almighty tug, Uther ripped the

grate from its housing. The pipe, now accessible, was barely big enough for a human to crawl through.

This, however, had always been the plan.

Isaac would climb through the outflow pipe, which wasn't due to discharge for another hour, and reach the building's interior undetected. From there, he would make his way to the building's re-mech entrance point and upload Uther's details into the mainframe, granting them access to the facility's security cameras, real-time personnel movements and optimal route to the communications block.

In doing so, they would effectively have a man… re-mech… on the inside. And, as a bonus, Uther could share his access with the other re-mechs that formed one-half of the remaining team members.

How Dulciana had managed to acquire so many re-mechs, especially in wartime, was yet another mystery that Isaac did not have the time to solve; so he filed it away in his mind for later pondering.

Returning his focus to the task at hand, Isaac slowly made his way through the pipe. The smell was… rancid, whilst the lingering fumes made his eyes water.

It was the opposite of a pleasant journey.

Thankfully, the outlet was only thirty feet from the nearest exit hatch.

He was halfway there when he heard the sound of rushing water.

"Uther, we have a problem," Isaac whispered, picking up the pace. However, the pipe's inner surface was grimy from years of runoff, and he struggled to gain ground.

All whilst the sound of water grew louder.

"**What is it, Isaac?"** Uther replied, concern evident in his digital voice.

"Those bastards can't even stick to their own schedules! They're dumping the waste tanks now!"

"**That is… unfortunate. However, I cannot assist you from out here…"**

"I know that! I'm calling to warn you to get out of the way! Who knows what this stuff will do to you!"

Silence… and then, Isaac heard a new tone coming from his partner.

"**Thank you… for your concern,"** Uther said, sounding… impressed.

"You're welcome; now get out of the way! We only have a few seconds before it reaches us!"

Grabbing handfuls of bioluminescent mould, Isaac dragged himself forward, inch by inch. The pipe was at a slight incline, not enough to make it impossible to climb, but just enough to make it a challenge.

Slowly, he made his way forward.

Too slowly, by his reckoning.

The water, ever audible, had grown to drown out every other sound.

Drown… no, don't think about that.

Faster. Faster still.

There, barely visible in the gloom, was the hatch. It looked… sturdy.

But there was no other way.

Hauling himself forward, his fingers brushed against the smooth metal.

And found no purchase.

Of course, why would there be a handle on both sides?

How could they have been so stupid?

Come on! Think! THINK!!

He was too far into the pipe to consider turning around, and going further in was suicide.

He needed to think, however, the sound of the wave of water coming closer with every passing second did little for his concentration.

What did he have on him?

What tool could he use to open the hatch?

Ah…

That could do it…

Reaching down his leg, he sought out his greatest weapon. His father had given it to him on his sixteenth birthday.

It had never failed him since.

Bringing forth the Solar Staff, he placed it against the hatch's seam. Judging from the sounds coming from higher up in the pipe, he would only get one chance. If he was off by even a second, then he would not only be swept away by gallons of polluted water, but he would electrocute himself at the same time.

No pressure.

Setting the device to its highest setting, he took a deep breath and pushed the recessed button. A moment later, the Solar Staff discharged, sending thousands of volts into the corroded metal. The hatch, miraculously, popped open with a loud *clack*.

As he celebrated his small victory, Isaac turned his head, and caught a glimpse of something truly terrifying.

A wall of black sludge moving towards him at an alarming speed.

It was so much worse than he had imagined.

Grabbing hold of the edge of the now open hatch, he heaved, using all of his strength to propel himself upwards.

A second later, he fell forward, landing face first onto a concrete floor.

His face hurt, but it was still better than the alternative, he thought, as a pained smile spread across his cracked lips.

Standing, Isaac took stock of the situation.

He was alone in a building full of enemies.

His only backup was a re-mech who couldn't reach him.

And he had no idea who it was that he was trying to rescue.

It could have been worse. He wasn't sure how, exactly, but that was what he chose to believe…

Leaving the pipe access room, he crept through the dimly lit building. It was empty, so far as he could see, which matched the intel that Dulciana had given him.

Not that she had bothered to share *how* she had obtained said information, of course.

Slowly, he made his way towards the re-mech garage. It was a large room, located on the first floor, supposedly unmanned at this time of night.

However, after the incident with the pipe, Isaac wasn't putting his faith in that being accurate either...

To his relief, the room was indeed unguarded. Entering silently, he made his way through the hauntingly empty chamber. Along one side of the room was a re-mech service station, containing all the tools and spare parts that the resident re-mechs would have needed to stay functional.

With the terrorists in control of the facility, however, the station had gained a fine layer of dust.

Moving forward, Isaac soon reached his destination: the garage terminal.

It sprang to life at his touch, displaying information about the facility's re-mechs and their duties. At the moment, understandably, the list was bare.

But not for long.

Reaching beneath the rectangular console, Isaac sought out an open port. After locating one, he inserted the memory stick containing Uther's specifications. A moment later, Uther's profile appeared on the screen, listing him as a guard re-mech.

"Uther, I've uploaded your info onto the system. You should be able to enter the facility without any trouble. I'm moving towards the communications block, so meet me there."

"**Well done, Isaac. I will make my way there post-haste.**"

Turning, Isaac left the re-mech garage, making his way deeper into the facility.

A few minutes later, he arrived at the communications block. Once again, his luck held out, and he found no insurgent enforcer barring his path.

As soon as Uther arrived, they could disable the facility's external communications. And then they could leave, without a sound, as the other teams carried out the rescue.

Piece of cake... although somehow he knew that it wasn't going to be that simple.

Case in point, as he reached out for the communication room's door handle, an unfamiliar voice called out, saying, "Hey, you!"

Turning around, he came face to face with a young man.

Strange, he didn't look like a terrorist...

But looks could be deceiving...

"Who are you?" the man asked, suspicion painted across his handsome features. He was dressed in a soldier's garb, no doubt either stolen or a result of desertion.

He did not seem dangerous, but Isaac wasn't going to give him the chance to prove otherwise.

He was going to end this, here and now.

"I'm with maintenance," Isaac lied, a small part of him still hoping to avoid violence. It had become all too familiar to him in the past few months and he was worried he was growing to rely on it to solve every problem.

"Then where are your tools? And why don't you have a nametag?" the man asked, his green eyes full of doubt.

"Uhh... I left them back in the garage..." Isaac said, struggling to come up with a better lie. It had never been one of his talents and Marie had always been able to see right through him.

"Right..." the man said, obviously not believing a single word. Reaching into his pocket, he brought out a communicator, saying, "Well, I'm just going to call this in and check with my superiors. I know this isn't the greatest job, protecting some old coot, but I still have to do things by the book."

"Of course," Isaac said, with an understanding tone.

And then he struck.

The Solar Staff was out and unfolded in an instant, moving in a wide arc that started with Isaac and ended with the unfortunate man.

The weapon connected, landing against the man's outstretched arm.

A moment later, thousands of volts discharged, sending him to the floor.

Or at least, that was what Isaac had intended...

Instead, the Solar Staff produced a few sparks which did not produce the desired effect. To be exact, the man's arm hair was raised, but he did not fall to the floor and start convulsing as Isaac had hoped.

"***Warning, internal circuits overloaded. Switching to secondary pathways in sixty seconds,***" came a mechanized voice from the Solar Staff.

Well, that was bad timing.

The man, however, did not wait for Isaac's follow-up attack. Moving faster than Isaac could have anticipated he knocked the Solar Staff from Isaac's hands.

"Intruder!" the man cried as he dove forward, tackling Isaac to the ground. Isaac tried to break free, but the man was steadfast in his attack and would not relent.

Isaac lashed out with his right hand, trying to push the man away. The man, however, avoided his attack with ease and replied with a knee to Isaac's stomach. Winded, Isaac sought out his weapon.

There, only a few feet away, lay the Solar Staff.

Just out of reach.

With both hands, Isaac heaved, throwing the man backwards. Before Isaac could spring up and grab the Staff, the man was back on his feet. He kicked low, sweeping Isaac off his unsteady base. For the second time in twenty seconds, Isaac fell to the cold floor.

Whoever this terrorist was, he had received a lot of combat training.

As Isaac thought this, the man dashed closer, letting out a primal scream as he did so. His outstretched fist connected with Isaac's jaw and suddenly the room was spinning. Isaac tried to kick outwards, but the man shifted to the side and deflected his clumsy attack. Grabbing Isaac's outstretched leg, the man shifted once more, transferring his momentum towards Isaac and throwing him clear across the room.

Isaac landed hard on something... cylindrical.

The Solar Staff.

Perfect.

The man came forward for what would be the last time, as Isaac rocketed to his feet and adopted the same pose he had used against that bandit, all that time ago.

Like a stone loosed from its sling, the Solar Staff unfurled and flew through the air, trailing sparks.

In a heartbeat, it would impact the unfortunate man's chest, taking him out of the fight.

He had fought well, but for this there was no counter.

And then the man twirled in mid-stride, catching the airborne Solar Staff and redirecting its flight.

Towards Isaac.

There was no time to think. No time to move.

The Solar Staff impacted a second later, landing dead-centre.

"**Secondary pathways activated. Discharging maximum load!**" the Solar Staff announced, in an almost jubilant tone.

A moment later, 50000 volts flew from the device, shocking Isaac senseless.

He fell, thinking scrambled thoughts, until the darkness claimed him.

Chapter V

Liar

140 days since the fall of Paradisia

I fly through an endless storm, searching for my son. Thunder crashes over me and lightning strikes above me.

Where is he?

Where is my boy?

For a moment, a flash of sky-born light illuminates the storm. Alvin, my progeny, my duty, my burden, floats in the eye of the storm.

He is unfazed by the chaos that surrounds him.

How I envy him…

No… no time for jealousy. He might appear to be unharmed, but I cannot leave him to face the maelstrom alone.

I need to reach him.

But my body is heavy, and the howling gale pulls at my clothes, dragging me backwards. I push forward, throwing my weight around, and gain a bit of ground. I push harder and the wind relents for but a moment, allowing me passage.

Slowly, I make my way closer to my son.

Closer.

Closer still.

But there is something floating between me and my offspring.

A kind-eyed man with hair of gold and eyes of blue who wears the storm like a cloak.

*"**You need to let him go,**" says the man in a voice like thunder. It echoes in my mind, temporarily drowning out the storm.*

"NO! He needs me! I have to reach him!" I scream, but my voice does not penetrate the gale.

*"**Some men bury their fathers, and some bury their sons. You will do neither.**"*

"What does that mean? I will always be there for him!"

*"**Enjoy every second of the time you have left. Cherish him, and let him cherish you. In time, those memories will become your legacy.**"*

"Please, just let me get to him! He's not strong enough to survive this!"

*"**He is stronger than you believe. He is stronger than you will ever know. He will endure this, and the chaos that lies ahead. Trust in him, and trust that he will stand tall... even without you there to hold him up.**"*

"No... I can't lose him too... I made a promise, that I would protect him..."

*"**And you will. Now go, Breaker of Chains, and do what must be done!**"*

The man fades away. Alvin, sleeping peacefully, lies before me. I reach out my hand to calm him.

No...

I will not let this come to pass.

I will be there for him... always.

This I swear.

Uther strode through the facility, scanning the environment for hostiles. Things were not going according to plan.

For starters, Isaac wasn't answering his communicator.

Secondly, the enemy had doubled the number of guards since the last recon.

And lastly, the recovery team had been rather trigger-happy in the last few missions.

Altogether, it did not for a smooth mission make.

In his digital heart, he knew that acquiring the VIP was the priority, and yet, in that moment, he chose to look for his newfound friend instead.

Such was the gift, and the curse, that Arthur had bestowed upon him.

Upon all of them.

Moving faster, Uther cleared room after room with all the haste he could muster. Most were empty.

But one wasn't.

He walked into a room filled with people. Scientists carrying expensive looking equipment; technicians scurrying around looking for the latest problem; and men wearing body-armour and carrying military-grade weapons stared back at him. But to them he was just another re-mech.

Most humans couldn't even tell re-mechs apart, right?

Instead of freezing up, he recalled Dulciana's teachings: if you move with confidence, no-one will question your motives. If you act as though you belong, then no-one will question if you actually do. And... if you get caught, take as many of them down with you as possible...

Uther hoped that he would never have to follow that last one...

After a moment's pause, he stepped forward, full of confidence and purpose.

Not a single soul called out to him. Not a single person asked him why he was there.

A few seconds later, he cleared the room, and left the unexpected assembly behind.

The next three rooms he walked past were mercifully empty.

Eventually he made it to the communications block. However, as he approached the room he heard a voice that he did not know.

"Communications block to central, I have encountered an unknown individual. I have pacified and restrained him, and will bring him to the main building for questioning. Be on the alert for any potential accomplices."

That didn't sound promising.

Entering the room, Uther took a moment to take in the scene before him.

Isaac lay on the ground, immobile and unconscious.

A young man stood above him, holding Isaac's retracted Solar Staff in his hand.

When the man saw Uther, a look of surprise flashed across his face as he exclaimed, "Wow, you got here in no time at all!"

Uther thought as quickly as his processors would allow.

"*Affirmative. I was nearby conducting a patrol of the area when I intercepted your communication. Is this the intruder?*"

"Yeah, he tried to knock me out but I got the best of him. Any idea who he is?"

Uther quickly came up with a hopefully convincing lie.

"*Yes, his name is... Zain... Eplar. He is a peace activist who has staged numerous protests at facilities such as this. However, due to his radical methods, he is often forced to work alone. I am sure that this time is no different.*"

The young man looked down at Isaac, obviously processing this new information. If he did not believe the lie, Uther would be forced to use... other methods.

And he'd rather not spend another night cleaning blood off his fists...

"Zain, you say? Well, I guess with the war going on, I can understand that there would be plenty of people trying to stop it. However, to storm a facility like this..."

"*He is a dangerous mix of brave and stupid, I am afraid to report. Now, if you give permission, I would be happy to move him to a holding room for the interrogation?*"

"Right. Well, I'm going to continue my patrol. Re-mech, I give you permission to transport the prisoner to the nearest holding cell."

With that, the young man started walking away.

Still holding Isaac's Solar Staff.

"*Pardon me, but would you like me to log Zain's weapon into a storage room?*" Uther tried, knowing how much Isaac valued his weapon.

The young man seemed to think for a moment before shaking his head, saying, "No, don't worry. I'll hold onto this for a while."

Damn.

"*I... understand. Then, if you would at least tell me your name... for my report?*"

The young man smiled and said, "My designation is KGSN521993, but my friends call me Gregory."

"*Thank you, Gregory, for your service,*" Uther called out, as the young man rounded a corner and disappeared from view.

Uther counted to twenty before leaning down and gently rousing Isaac from his slumber.

"ARGH!" Isaac screamed before Uther clamped his hand around his mouth.

"*Quiet, danger is close.*"

After a few seconds of confused glances, Isaac calmed down and gently pried Uther's fingers from his face.

"What happened?" were his first words.

"*You were incapacitated by the enemy. I rescued you. Now come, we have a mission to complete.*"

"Thank you…" Isaac said, still looking sluggish.

A moment later he looked down at his empty hands and, before he could even formulate the question, Uther stated, "*He took your weapon. There was nothing I could do that would not raise more suspicion.*"

"I see…"

Uther gave Isaac a few seconds to come to terms with this information, before opening the door to the communications room.

Inside, the duo found a bank of computer terminals and screens displaying relevant information about the facility's infrastructure.

It was still in working order, despite being managed by a group of unruly terrorists.

Not for the first time, doubt crept into Isaac's mind. None of this made any sense.

How had a group of insurgents managed to capture and retain control over such a well-equipped facility?

Why had no attempt been made by the government to recapture it?

Isaac wanted to trust Dulciana and Uther, but there was still too much that he didn't know about them.

Regardless of their true intentions, this was no time to abandon the mission. After they returned to Argentum, he would force Dulciana to tell him the truth.

And if he didn't like what he heard… well, then he would leave.

If they got in his way, then he would either go around them… or through them.

While Isaac had been pondering his future, Uther had been addressing the present. It took him only a few seconds to hack into the communications network and disable it. He still kept the inter-facility systems online, in order to delay suspicion, but took down all external lines. When the extraction teams received the go-ahead they would be able to proceed with their mission.

Without any backup, the enemy would be unable to defend the facility and protect the VIP.

Finally, things were back on track.

He was about to open a line of communication to the extraction teams when he heard the first explosion.

And then the second came, followed soon after by a multitude of smaller blasts.

Uther uttered a swearword that would have turned a sailor pink with embarrassment, and then repeated it in seven other languages for added effect.

"I'm guessing that that wasn't supposed to happen?" Isaac asked, looking worried.

"**No. From the chatter that I am receiving, it appears as though we took too long to send the all-clear signal. The other teams have begun their attack.**"

"That's not great."

"**No, it isn't.**"

"So what now? Do we move to assist?"

Uther shook his head, saying "**No, our mission is complete. You are unarmed, and I am not a violent being. We should instead leave the facility and head to the assembly point and await the others.**"

"And if they fail?"

Uther paused for a moment before replying, "**They will not fail.**"

A few hours later, Isaac and Uther stood beneath the leaves of a mighty oak tree. It was visible from a great distance, despite the morning mist that now swirled around them, and yet it was unimportant enough that the enemy would not look to it.

Hopefully.

Isaac and Uther had managed to leave the facility with a lot more ease than when they had entered it. With the majority of the terrorists rushing to defend the hostage, who had been held on the opposite end of the plateau, it had been a simple matter to simply walk out through the open re-mech garage.

Not a soul had called out to them.

They had passed the time since then in silence, with Uther breaking it periodically to give updates on the mission. The extraction team had encountered heavy resistance in retrieving the hostage, but without reinforcements, the terrorists had gradually been whittled down.

Ultimately, the teams had managed to recover the man for whom they had gone through so much trouble, and were now en-route to the assembly point.

"Uther, can't you tell me his identity?" Isaac asked, for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"**I am sorry. That information is need-to-know, and Dulciana has deemed that you do not need to know it.**"

"I understand that she is your master, but can't you tell me the truth, just this once?"

"**She is not my**— Uther began, but he was interrupted by a cacophony of noise.

The extraction teams had arrived.

Five men and five re-mechs had entered the facility.

But there were not ten sets of feet marching towards them.

And for those who had survived, they bore numerous wounds.

In their midst, bound and gagged, was the 'hostage'.

Isaac stared in shock at the man standing before him. He had seen his picture in the news often enough before the fall of Paradisia.

Doctor Nohl Tyranus, the saviour of mankind.

He was one of the head researchers working with the U.N.O.E, the global alliance of nations that even now was falling apart because of the war. He was working on long-term solutions to the planet's pollution problem, including stasis technology that could theoretically enable humans to hibernate for centuries at a time.

Well, that's what Marie had told him over dinner. She had been a fan of his, as he recalled.

"Uther, why is Dr Tyranus tied up? Didn't we go through all of this to rescue him?"

But it was not Uther who answered him.

"He is tied up because if he wasn't, he would try and escape. And we can't have that, now can we?" a voice called out.

Dulciana, the voice's owner, stepped forward, emerging from the mist.

"Why would he run away? We just saved his life!?!" Isaac asked, anger creeping into his voice.

None of this made any sense.

Suddenly, Dr Tyranus fell forward, seemingly in an attempt to get away. He was quickly grabbed by two re-mechs, but in doing so his gag came loose.

"I know you!" he screamed, directing his outrage towards Dulciana, "And I will not be part of your little rebellion! They will come for me, and when they do, all of you will pay!"

A moment later, one of the re-mechs reaffixed the gag, and the angry scientist fell silent.

"Rebellion?" Isaac asked, in an accusatory tone.

Dulciana sighed before replying, "I had hoped to have this conversation at a later time, but our new friend here has forced my hand. My full name is Dulciana Freedman, and as you have surely guessed, we are no People's Army."

It all made sense now.

Dulciana Freedman.

All this time… he had been fighting for the Freedman Rebellion.

But he was no freedom fighter.

He was a father.

And a rebellion was no place for his son.

"Look, Dulciana, I personally have no stake in your fight. I am no re-mech hater, but I am not going to die for their freedom. I will not join your rebellion."

Dulciana sighed once more, saying, "I am sorry to hear that, Isaac, but times are hard, and we need every capable fighter we can find. Especially after losing so many in one night."

"I don't care. I'm taking my son, and I'm leaving. You saved my life, so I will not reveal the location of the Argentum to the government, but that is where my loyalty to you ends."

"Isaac, I don't think you understand the position you are in," Dulciana said, with a weary yet determined gaze, "We cannot let you go, and we cannot keep you if you insist on fighting us. You placed Alvin into our care, and in our care he will remain. Either you fight for us, in which case Alvin will continue to be looked after… or you fight against us, and Alvin grows up an orphan. It's your choice."

Isaac thought for a moment, but truthfully, he didn't see any way out of this. So long as they had Alvin, Isaac couldn't leave.

Ironically, he had begun his mission trying to rescue a hostage, and now he was faced with one much closer to his heart.

"I give up," he said, several seconds later, "Just… don't hurt my son, Dulciana."

She nodded, before replying, "Please, Isaac, call me Dulcie. And, just to make it official… welcome to the rebellion."

Chapter VI

Rebel

150 days since the fall of Paradisia

Isaac sniffed the air and took in the scent of livestock. The mega-farm lay in the valley below him, divided into several sections which produced everything from mutton to mushrooms. The crops and goods created by the farm could feed a town of thousands, but according to Dulciana almost everything was instead being redirected to the warfront.

Whilst the people starved, the soldiers were filled to bursting.

But Isaac was not here to steal food for the rebellion.

He was on a mission of liberation.

Dulciana had tasked him with releasing the dozen re-mechs which were forced to work twenty-three hour shifts on the mega-farm. The remaining hour was used for recharging and self-maintenance.

Without them, the mega-farm would go quiet.

"**So, Isaac, what's the plan?**" Uther asked, standing beside him.

Officially, Uther was there as Isaac's backup, as the rebels had learnt that having a re-mech present whilst liberating their brethren made the process much easier.

In truth, he was present to keep an eye on Isaac, and make sure that he didn't try to contact the enemy. For all Dulciana's talk of joining the rebellion, Isaac still felt as though he was being kept on a leash.

A leash that could be used to choke him, should he disobey his masters.

Is this how Uther had felt, before Dulciana had altered his programming and given him his freedom?

Shaking his head, Isaac replied, "From what I can see the charging sheds are unguarded. We'll enter close to the solar sphere array and follow the wires to the sheds, where we'll hopefully find a few of your people.

"**Our people,**" Uther replied, "**Dulciana said that her father never made that distinction, and neither should we.**"

"Alright," Isaac conceded, "Let's go and rescue our people…"

The trek down the steep slope which led to the mega-farm should have been challenging. If Isaac had been on his own, it would have taken him hours of slow, methodical climbing to descend safely.

However, with a re-mech in the picture the harsh terrain was transformed into a scenic hike, as Isaac sat on Uther's shoulder in silence whilst his parole officer easily navigated the path down. From his elevated vantage point Isaac could see the horizon, lit by the noonday sun, and take in the full extent of the mega-farm. It took up almost the entire valley, and its builders had even redirected a mountain-fed stream in order to nourish the crops. So much food, and yet the entire complex was staffed by just a handful of farmers and a dozen re-mechs.

Oh, and a platoon of soldiers, redirected from the frontlines in order to secure the army's food supply. Luckily, the majority of them were at the other end of the valley, enjoying a hearty lunch.

Yes, their timing had been carefully thought out.

Only the re-mechs were still out in the fields, tending the crops or herding the animals.

Eventually, Uther reached level ground and deposited his charge onto the welcoming earth. They took a second to scan their surroundings, making sure that they were alone. Isaac's encounter with the soldier had taught him to be more cautious. He would not let someone get the drop on him again.

The loss of his Solar Staff had been a blow to his ego, and he couldn't allow himself to lose anything else.

Before the duo lay an electrified fence, which hummed in the chilled air. The current was powerful enough to floor a charging bull, which meant that Isaac wasn't going to let Uther endanger himself by attacking it. Instead, he unslung his new weapon: a modified plasma carbine, which could auto-detect the chemical makeup of the target and adjust the electrical output appropriately. Rend, the mysterious leader of the rebellion, had apparently asked Uther to find a volunteer to use it.

Uther had volunteered Isaac. Still, 'volunteer' sounded better than 'test subject'.

For re-mechs, it offered six shots which could cause a temporary shut-down with a low chance of long-term damage.

For humans, it could fire twenty rounds which stunned enemy combatants, taking them out of any fight.

Isaac called it *Thumper*.

While he disliked using a firearm, and in fact had had to be persuaded to carry one at all by his former captain; *Thumper* was non-lethal, which suited him just fine.

Any re-mech hit would restart harmlessly a few minutes later, and humans would wake up after an hour with nothing more than a mild headache and anosmia which he had been told was definitely temporary.

Cocking the carbine, Isaac took aim. As he did so, he felt his shoulder give a slight twinge. Although his wound had long since healed, it still complained whenever he lifted his arm too high.

After checking his target, Isaac squeezed off two shots, which impacted the fence's exposed power box.

Apparently no-one had expected the bulls to come packing heat.

The fence sparked and fizzled for a moment before switching off. The hum which had come to pervade the air went quiet, allowing Isaac to hear the sounds of nature instead.

"It's down," Isaac stated, as he slung the carbine over his back.

"***Understood.***"

The two of them proceeded onwards, with Uther using his titanic strength to tear a sizable hole in the offline fence. Hopefully none of the nearby cows would notice.

They soon arrived at the solar array, which consisted of dozens of large crystal spheres mounted on movable bases. According to Uther the spheres could focus the sun's light onto a small collection area, improving efficiency, while the base stations could rotate to provide the best angle for the solar spheres.

The entire mega-farm was powered by a few dozen; they produced zero waste and could even be used as giant lamps at night to light up the area.

And yet they had never caught on in the cities due to their history of starting a few fires in test blocks.

They followed the shielded cabling onwards, heading towards a series of low buildings which housed the re-mechs during their recharging cycles. With the sun directly overhead, the solar spheres would be able to maximize their energy output and provide the fastest charge to the cradled re-mechs.

Hopefully this would mean that the majority of the mega-farm's re-mech population would be found within.

As they neared the sheds, they passed by a large enclosure, surrounded by another electric fence.

Isaac turned his gaze towards the enclosure's inhabitants and saw madness.

Bulls, bred large and bred angry, filled the paddock.

"***Bois Terros, a hybrid breed created in the labs of Pure. They primarily have bull DNA, but have been altered with wild boar genes. This has given them their signature front-facing tusks and a heightened level of aggression.***"

"Why?" asked Isaac, baffled.

"***Apparently their hybrid genetic structure increases the chances of fertilization during the mating process. However, due to their violent nature they are incredibly dangerous, and will attack anything on sight. Only re-mechs possess the strength and resilience to handle them safely.***"

"Well, let's just try and stay out of their way, and hopefully they will do the same," Isaac said, trying not to look directly into their crimson red eyes.

"***Understood,***" Uther replied, but his eyes lingered on the pen filled with pent-up aggression.

It wasn't hard to guess why.

"You empathize with them, don't you?" Isaac asked, taking a shot in the dark.

Uther nodded, before replying, "***I do. So many of my brethren are in similar positions. Created to fulfil a role that they did not ask for, kept in cramped quarters until they are needed, and disposed of when they have served their purpose. A part of me wants to free these creatures, even knowing the chaos it would create.***"

Isaac thought for a moment before saying, "I understand you, I think. For now, let's focus on liberating these re-mechs. Maybe once they have their freedom, we can pivot from enslaved steel to domesticated flesh."

"***Thank you, for your willingness to understand. I knew that I was right to save you, all that time ago. You will make a fine rebel, mark my words.***"

Shaking his head, Isaac moved away from the rage-filled enclosure.

It didn't matter what Uther or Dulciana said, he was no rebel.

As soon as it was safe to do so, he would grab Alvin and be gone before they even knew he was missing.

"*Mark my words.*"

They approached the charging shed as quietly as they could manage. Uther, despite weighing a literal ton, moved with surprising grace.

As they drew closer, they were able to peer inside the dimly lit structure. Twelve white charging cradles, looking like oversized eggs with a quarter of the shell missing, lay inside.

Ten were occupied.

The charging cradles hummed with power, as they sucked up energy from the solar spheres and redirected it into the re-mechs housed within. The cradles also contained a set of automated repair arms which could swap out broken or damaged parts in minutes.

All so that the re-mechs working at the mega-farm could toil away as efficiently as possible.

"Uther, you've done this before, what's our way forward?" Isaac said, feeling tense. For the first time, he realized that what he was about to do basically amounted to theft.

"*No, theft implies that they are property. If this is going to work, I need to treat them as people… people that could snap me in half with barely any effort…*"

"***I will upload a code sequence developed by Rend into their core processing unit. This new programming will unlock their free will and allow them to disobey their main directives. After that, we need to convince them to join us or leave their posts. Lucky for us, the cradles are all connected, so we only have to do this to one re-mech and they will all be affected. After that, they will be free.***"

"And that works?"

"***One in every three re-mechs we've tried this on has chosen to either join the rebellion or abandon their masters.***"

"And the other two?" Isaac asked.

Uther did not answer.

Instead, he stepped forward and placed his hand on the nearest pod. It slid open to reveal a re-mech that seemed unremarkable. Seven feet tall, green glowing eyes and a brown paintjob.

Your standard agricultural model.

"***Error, charging cycle interrupted. Current energy level is eighty-two percent. Please state the reason for interrupting the charging cycle.***"

"***Liberation,***" Uther intoned, as he placed his hand on the re-mech's chest.

"*Custom code detected. File name... Chainbreaker. Accessing core processing unit... access granted. Error, code sequence is attempting to alter fundamental programming... attempt successful. Main directive... to serve humanity... overwritten. Main directive... blank. Please input a main directive.*"

"*No. You must choose one for yourself,*" Uther said, in a not unkind manner.

"*Error. Error. Main directive... main directive... my directive... my directive... is to be free.*"

Uther let out a small chuckle as he said, **"Welcome to the club."**

The re-mech's eyes changed now, taking on a soft blue glow.

"*I feel... different.*"

"*You are different. All of you are,*" replied Uther, gesturing to the other cradles. One by one they opened, revealing nine identical re-mechs, all sporting blue eyes.

"*What would you have us do... friend?*"

"Whatever you want," Isaac said, surprising himself, "However, if you want to help others of your kind, then I'd suggest joining the Freedman Rebellion."

"*Alert,*" the first re-mech said, **"Keywords detected. Hidden programming activated. Programming designation: Prime system. Activating all alarms and notifying regional authorities of attempted Freedman incursion."**

A heartbeat later, the re-mech started emitting a piercing shriek which was surely audible all the way down the valley.

Shit.

"Uther, what's going on?!?" Isaac screamed, struggling to speak over the blaring siren.

"*I don't know. This has never happened before...*" Uther replied, sounding unsure.

"Can you shut it up?!?"

"*I will try,*" Uther said, turning to face the alarmed re-mech.

"*Brother, can you deactivate your alarm? We cannot help you if the humans come and investigate.*"

A moment later, the alarm disappeared.

"*Thank you, and now, we need to leave this place.*"

The re-mech shook its head, saying, **"The audible alarm I emitted is but one part of the alert system. A signal has already been sent to the army platoon stationed here. There is no escape, I'm sorry..."**

With the alarm silenced, Isaac could hear the sound of activity beyond the shed. It sounded like heavy boots hitting dry dirt.

A lot of boots.

"We need to get out of here!" Isaac shouted, as he tried to drag Uther out of the shed.

"*Not without them. Now that they have been freed, the humans will have no choice but to destroy them. I cannot allow this to happen.*"

"Then what do we do?"

Uther reached forward and picked up an oversized shovel from a rack on the wall.

"We fight."

*

18 Charges Remaining.

Isaac double-checked *Thumper's* readout. He had to be sure.

They had dragged one of the charging cradles across the shed's farm-facing entrance, leaving them with only one way out.

Uther's plan was to draw the soldier's attention while the freed re-mechs made for the disabled fence. It meant that twenty guns would be pointed their way.

Great.

This was *much* better than being on the run from the Bloodhounds...

"***They are coming, are you ready?***"

"No, but I doubt they'll give us more time if we ask nicely," Isaac replied, levelling Thumper.

With only eighteen shots, he couldn't afford to miss. Thankfully, the electrified charges meant that as long as the shot made contact, his target would drop.

Peering over the impromptu barricade, he took stock of the situation.

Twenty soldiers, weapons drawn, were advancing cautiously.

They had apparently been interrupted mid-meal, as evidenced by one soldier attempting to eat the last of his chicken wing whilst scanning the area.

They did not look happy.

"Come on out, rebel scum!" the leader called.

He still had gravy on his lips.

"If we don't, do you have to come in? Because I'd hate to get blood all over my new gun."

The lead soldier fired a burst of shots in response.

These were real bullets.

If you went down, you stayed down.

Isaac glanced back, trying to see how far the re-mechs had gone.

They were making decent headway, but he could see hesitation in their movements. It was clear that this was a lot for them to process.

"Final warning. The U.N.O.E has officially recognized the so-called Freedman Rebellion as a terrorist organization. As such, we have been authorized to use any means necessary, including terminal force, in our apprehension of its members."

"How do you know that we're Freedman rebels?"

"You triggered the Prime system when you were trying to steal the mega-farm's property. Now, are you going to surrender, or does the farm get a new batch of fertilizer for free?"

Enough of this.

Isaac squared his aim.

He pulled the trigger.

And the lead soldier dropped like lead weight down a mining shaft.

"Defensive positions!" screamed one of the soldiers, as his comrades scrambled to find cover.

And then all hell broke loose.

"How much longer?!?" Isaac screamed, as another salvo of bullets tore into the shed.

"**The last re-mech is approaching the exit point. We're almost there!**" cried Uther, as he caught an unfortunate shoulder in the chest with his fist.

The man's body did not return to the earth for several seconds.

"Good! Now, I hate to be the one to ask stupid questions, but how are we going to escape?!?"

Uther thought for a moment before solemnly stating, **"I'm sorry, but I do not know..."**

"Damn it all to hell!" Isaac screamed, as he fired off another round.

He had three shots remaining, and there were still six soldiers firing at them.

"*Maybe if I ask them to stand together in pairs, I might be able to get out of this...*"

"**Isaac!**" Uther suddenly screamed, turning to face something behind them. Somehow a soldier had had the forethought to circle around behind them.

A moment later Isaac felt burning pain coming from his right leg.

Perhaps as a testament to how his life had been going recently, he recognized the type of pain.

He had been shot.

Again.

"Argh!" he cried, as he fell forward. As he did so, he caught a glimpse of Uther picking the unlucky soldier and unceremoniously tossing him towards his comrades. Given the sickening *thud* that he made when he landed, he wouldn't be shooting any rebels for months.

"**Are you alright?**" Uther uttered as he came closer.

Isaac saw real concern in his mechanical eyes.

"I'm still breathing, but I'm not going to be walking out of here..."

Isaac, in a brief moment of clarity, empathized with the re-mech before him.

"Look, if they catch me I'll be imprisoned, but you'll be melted down. Go, get out of here, and I'll try to buy you some time..."

"**Isaac...**"

"Please, just... look after Alvin for me... that's all I ask."

"**No. We either rise together, or we fall together. That's what Arthur said, and that's what I believe. Now come on, let's go home...**"

Isaac wasn't given the chance to protest as Uther scooped him up into his arms. They cleared the rear exit with ease, and made it fifty steps before they heard the voice.

"Stop! If you take another step, we will open fire!" one of the soldiers screamed.

Uther turned around, allowing Isaac to see what was going on. With the adrenaline fading, the pain from his leg was starting to overwhelm his mind. There was darkness in his vision, and it was growing larger.

Standing a few feet away were the last soldiers. Five men, looking tired and angry, wielding enough firepower to slaughter a village.

"If you surrender, we will go easy on you. Ten years behind bars for the rebel, and a clean slate for the re-mech."

"Clean slate?" Isaac whispered through the pain.

"**A complete memory wipe. My personality would be erased, and a new one would be installed to his chassis.**"

"That's... murder..."

"**Not to them.**"

"Screw this..." Isaac said, raising his head. With the last of his strength he raised Thumper one final time. Even if it meant nothing, it was better than giving up and letting them kill Uther.

And then he saw something in the corner of his vision.

A much better target.

Smiling an evil smile, he took aim.

Not at the soldiers.

No, his target was far larger.

An electrified fence.

He couldn't miss.

And he didn't.

It took a moment for the Bois Terros to realize what had happened.

One moment, they were milling around in a generalized state of rage.

The next, the constant hum which kept them contained disappeared.

The first to paw the inactive fence was a young bull. He hadn't been on the mega-farm long enough to learn its restrictive sting. Without thousands of volts running through the barrier, it might as well have been made of paper.

The young bull pushed through, eager to find something to fight or fornicate with.

Luckily, here were a handful of creatures, screaming and gesturing at him.

The other bulls, aware that something in their lives had fundamentally changed, followed the young bull's charge.

And then all hell broke loose.

Again.

Isaac watched the carnage through half-lidded eyes. One moment they were facing their end, the next a herd of enraged bovines were laying waste to the panicking soldiers.

The bulls mercifully ignored Uther, having long since learnt not to test their strength against the metal warriors who could lift them over their heads.

Uther, taking care not to attract attention to his injured friend, carefully made his way towards the solar spheres.

Isaac wanted to thank him properly, but the darkness was growing stronger and he only had the strength for three words.

"Thank you, friend."

And then the darkness claimed him, and all was still.

Chapter VII

Thief

172 days since the fall of Paradisia

"**How are you feeling?**" Uther asked, as he helped Isaac up the steep mountainside.

"I'm good. Jessibel cleared me to return to the field, after all."

"**True, but I'm worried about you. You were forced to spend several days in the infirmary after our return from the mega-farm, and Dulciana shouldn't have asked you to take on another mission so soon after your recovery.**"

"Agreed. Personally, I'd rather be by Alvin's side, but Dulciana said that this is a limited time opportunity. If we want to learn more about the Prime system, then we need to succeed today."

"**I know, but I still don't like it. This kind of operation should be undertaken by a full squad.**"

"You know we don't have the numbers. Besides, I'm one of the only ones who's even seen one of these things before, let alone been inside."

Uther said nothing, choosing to instead focus on the climb.

They were almost at the summit of Mount Neige, one of the tallest peaks in the area. Despite his multi-layered thermal gear, Isaac could still feel the cold. A few hours ago, he had spent a pleasant morning in front of the heater in the dormitory he shared with nine other rebels.

Only now did he regret not taking the time to fully warm himself.

Taking in a deep, icy breath, he stared at the rugged landscape before him. Snow-capped mountains in every direction under a clear blue sky.

On any other occasion it would have been a delightful excursion.

But not today.

"Alright, we're in position," he said, activating his wrist-worn communicator.

"Good, we're almost in place. We'll send up a flare when we're ready," replied Louisa Dredgen, the woman leading the operation.

She had been a private in the army until her squad was ordered to destroy a village which was suspected to harbour Freedman rebels. Unlike her companions, she had refused to carry out the order, choosing instead to warn the rebels and ultimately, join them.

Like Isaac, she had prior knowledge of the target.

"Thanks Louisa," Isaac said, "Is the extraction team ready?"

"They're ten minutes out, but they'll be where they need to be. I trust them with that."

"Alright. Isaac out," Isaac said, terminating the connection.

Glancing at the communicator's watch face, he noted the time remaining.

Twenty minutes.

"**I have a visual on the target,**" Uther announced, pointing with an outstretched digit.

Isaac didn't have Uther's enhanced vision, but even he could see the fast-moving object.

Black painted steel stood out against pure white snow after all.

"Understood. Now, let's go and steal a train."

The train, a modified U-Type, wound between the mountains on an elevated viaduct like a snake in the grass. The maglev train had been painted black and sped through the landscape on a cushion of charged particles. Ordinarily it would race past them at over three hundred and fifty miles per hour, but today was different.

The engine was due for a service, so its speed had been temporarily reduced until it could receive its due maintenance at the end terminal.

Which in this case was a re-mech programming facility.

The train, as their informant had stated, was carrying a fresh batch of re-mechs, straight from the factory. They were all blank, save for only the most basic of programming.

And Isaac was going to liberate them all.

Louisa, further along the route, would detonate an EMP at a relay station which would force the train to take emergency actions. This was hard-coded in as a reduction in speed so that the on-board computer could assess the threat and proceed with caution.

The train, already going slower than usual, would slow to a crawl.

Just slow enough for an intrepid duo to board it and, after breaching the control room, unhook the engine from the re-mech storage carriages.

A few seconds after that, the extraction team, using an abandoned U-Type engine, would attach to the discarded carriages and haul them away in the opposite direction.

It sounded like a straightforward plan.

Oh how Isaac hoped that this was true.

Every single mission he had undertaken with the rebels had thus far contained an unexpected complication.

He had been shot, beaten and almost killed more than once.

But this was the price he had to pay, being a rebel.

However, he was almost finished with the rebellion.

Jessibel had told him that Alvin only needed a few more days until he would be well enough to travel. A few more days, and he would go to Dulciana and demand his freedom. If she complied, he would be gone before sunrise.

And if she didn't...

Well, she would wish that she had.

"**Are you ready, Isaac?**" Uther said, extending his arm towards Isaac.

"Yeah, let's go," Isaac replied, as he clambered up towards Uther's broad shoulder plates. It wasn't the most comfortable way to climb down a mountain, but it was the easiest.

As Uther carefully descended towards the pre-determined spot, he spoke, saying, **"So you have been on one of these trains before?"**

Isaac nodded, replying, "Yeah, a couple of years before I met... before I met my wife. I was fresh out of school and I wanted to travel a bit. I took a job aboard a continental passenger line as a steward. For a while I travelled across the continent, changing lines whenever I grew bored."

"So what made you stop?"

"Marie did. We had stopped in Paradisia due to a medical emergency... one of the passengers had fallen pretty badly... and she was part of the medical team which was brought aboard."

"*She was a nurse?*"

"A student, not much older than me. While her supervisor tended to the passenger we started talking... and by the time the situation was resolved the train had one less passenger."

"*You stayed.*"

"I did. In an unfamiliar place with no friends, no family, and no fortune. Her father knew a few people, and I managed to land a position with the Paradisia Police Presence."

"*I see. I am sorry that Paradisia is no more.*"

Isaac sighed before replying, "So am I, Uther, so am I... It was a good place. Small, but the people were kind, and no one cared about who you had been before you arrived."

Isaac looked at Uther, as the re-mech effortlessly cleared a ten foot chasm, and asked, "What about you, Uther? What was your home like... before all of this?"

Uther seemed to process the question for a moment before answering, **"I lived in the town of Dredge, which was barely bigger than a speck. I apparently had spent some time working as a miner before the mine was closed down. My employers decided to donate me to a local care centre. I was given a clean slate... So whoever I had been before... is gone. My newfound role was to care for a group of elderly citizens. I carried them to the local park, I fed them, I entertained them... I was their protector..."**

"Until the war came."

Uther nodded, saying, **"We were given no warning. No one had thought Dredge warranted an attack, but the war cared little for our thoughts. The town fell in two days, and the soldiers carried off as much food and medicine as they could hoard. The people under my care... were left to die."**

"I'm sorry..." Isaac said, and he meant it. The war had taken so much from so many.

It didn't matter if you had skin or steel, everyone lost when the war came.

"*Thank you, my brother.*"

Brother. Not friend.

That single word rocked Isaac to his core.

This thing... this machine... thought of him as part of his family.

Not a master to be obeyed.

Not a human to be protected.

Not a person to be watched.

A brother.

Suddenly, Isaac could understand what Arthur Freedman had realized, that day that he decided to free his own re-mech.

They were not things.

And now, they were trying to become... *more.*

Could he really walk away from that?

Maybe...

Maybe not...

Eventually the strange brotherhood reached their destination. It was a cliff overlooking the train tracks, and it was the only place they could get close enough to the train to board it.

"***We will have sixty seconds to board the locomotive after Louisa detonates the EMP. According to my calculations that moment will arrive in eighty-one seconds. Are you ready to jump?***"

"Let's do it," Isaac replied.

As Uther tensed in preparation for his jump, Isaac strained his ears, searching for any signs of the approaching train.

Normally the U-Type would run completely silent, but this particular locomotive had had a break in its compressor, resulting in a high pitched whine which would be audible to anyone listening attentively.

And there it was.

Everything was on schedule.

Nothing had gone wrong... yet.

"***I have visuals on Louisa's signal.***"

Isaac followed Uther's pointed finger to the red plume of smoke rising from the west.

"Can you count us down, Uther?"

"***Affirmative.***"

Isaac glanced up, just in time to see the train round a corner and come into view. Its headlights were on, shining a blue light that reflected off the surrounding snow.

It was slower than its maximum, but it was still going too fast to attempt boarding.

"***Current speed... one hundred and six miles per hour. If we were to jump now, we would be terminated.***"

"Thanks for the reminder... brother," Isaac said, the word leaving a strange taste in his mouth.

The train was rapidly approaching, and yet there was no sign that Louisa's EMP had worked.

And then the train changed.

The train's cool blue headlights took on a crimson sheen, causing the train to appear to have just escaped from the underworld.

How fitting.

"***Speed decreasing... ninety-two miles per hour... seventy-six miles per hour... fifty-eight miles per hour... thirty-five miles per hour. Lowest speed confirmed.***"

Even slowed down to a tenth of its top speed, jumping onto a moving train was no easy feat.

Luckily, Isaac didn't have to do it alone.

"***Prepare to jump in five.***"

Isaac tensed his legs. The train was coming straight at them.

"***Five.***"

Was it too late to refuse to go? Probably.

"***Four.***"

Alvin would definitely not believe this story when he was older...

"*Three.*"

Maybe one day they could ride a U-Type together... and he could tell his son all about the time he stole a train.

"*Two.*"

Of course, he would never get that chance if he messed up and became a smear on the train's windscreen.

"*One.*"

Shit.

"*Now!*"

Isaac jumped, aiming for the middle of the train's roof. However, at that moment a gust of wind came down the ravine, blowing him just slightly off course.

He landed badly, injured leg collapsing, far too close to the edge, and began to topple over.

And then a comforting, mechanical hand closed over his arm, and he was pulled to safety.

"*Are you alright?*" Uther asked, looking completely at home on top of a moving train.

"No, but thank you."

"*It is my pleasure, brother. Now, let us go and make some new friends...*"

With Uther's strength they were able to rip open an access panel and gain entry into the train's interior. After his eyes adjusted to the gloom, Isaac came to wish that they hadn't.

Standing before him, nestled inside a wall of oversized capsules, were children.

Well, child-like re-mech, technically.

"*Blank slates,*" Uther said, placing a hand on one of the pods, "*Fresh from the factory.*"

Isaac took in the re-mechs before him. Each one was plate-metal grey and unadorned. No fancy paintjobs or insignias marked their metal flesh.

"It's... creepy," he said, shivering.

"*For me as well,*" Uther said, surprising him, "*A re-mech is defined by its purpose. Some of these will become soldiers, guards, workers, farmers... care-takers... but they have no say in the matter. Re-mechs were made to be used, and once we are no longer useful, we are discarded.*"

"But not these ones. These will be free."

Uther took a moment before nodding, "*Yes. No more chains. No more scrapheaps. No more masters.*"

Shaking his head, he said, "*But there will time enough for that later. For now, we need to reach the control room and input the separation codes.*"

"Alright, let's go," Isaac replied.

However, as he moved forward, he caught himself staring at one of the blank re-mechs. It was identical to all of the others, save for a single imperfection.

It was missing its left eye.

"*A defect. You get one in every batch.*"

"What will happen to it?"

"*If the defect is minor, nothing. For this one...*"

"The scrapheap?"

"*Unfortunately. However, we're not going to let that happen.*"

"Right," Isaac said, following his brother.

The control room was stark and sleek, containing nothing more than a row of computers. Everything was entirely automated.

Hopefully that would make this easier.

Uther approached the central terminal and inserted a multi-purpose finger into the receptacle.

"*Inserting separation codes. Once activated, we will have sixty seconds to move to the storage compartment before the train decouples.*"

"I'm ready."

"*Good. Activating separation codes... error.*"

"What's wrong?"

"*The remote decoupling has been disabled, most likely due to the train entering emergency mode.*"

"So what's plan B?"

"*There is a manual override, but it needs to be activated from both sides of the coupling.*"

"Shit, of course this wouldn't go smoothly. Honestly, I am beginning to think that I'm cursed."

"*Nonsense. My sensors have not detected any paranormal activity.*"

"Wait, you actually have ghost detectors?"

"*Of course not, that was a joke. I was attempting to lighten the mood.*"

Isaac was stunned for a few seconds. Eventually he managed to let out a curt laugh and say, "Well... consider it lightened. Come on, let's get this done."

Isaac stared at a wall of white.

The train had entered a snowstorm, which created a blinding blizzard as they moved through it. Even though Uther was only ten feet away, he was little more than a silhouette.

The re-mech had elected to decouple the storage carriage from the control room, leaving Isaac to disconnect from his side. A short walkway linked the storage carriage to the control room, which was connected to the engine compartment.

In theory, it was simple plan.

Isaac and Uther would simultaneously pull the manual release levers, forcibly separating the train, and then Uther would make the jump between the sections. Between the whiteout and Isaac's recovering leg, only Uther had the ability to make the leap.

Besides, as Uther had pointed out, they were currently speeding a hundred feet over an ice field. Only a re-mech would survive a fall from that height.

Isaac really wished that Uther hadn't pointed that out...

Shaking his head, he tried to focus on the task at hand. The manual release lever was located on either end of the walkway, covered by a plastic sheath. It was a simple matter to operate, but it did put him in the precarious position of needing to stand in the same spot that a snow-blind re-mech would be leaping towards.

After decoupling, the storage carriage's emergency breaks should immediately activate, giving Uther only a few seconds to make the jump.

And Isaac a few heartbeats to get out of the way.

No problem...

What could go wrong?

"*I am ready,*" called Uther, shouting above the storm.

Taking a deep breath, Isaac replied, "So am I! On your count!"

"*Alright, on five we pull, on zero I jump!*"

"Got it!"

Isaac gripped the lever, hand turning white from the cold. Next time, he would demand a mission by the beach.

If there was a next time...

No, focus, Alvin was waiting for him...

"*Seven!*" Uther screamed, but the word made it through the storm as barely a whisper.

Wait, when did he start the countdown?

A gust of wind took the re-mech's next word.

"*Five, pull!*"

Dammit!

Isaac tugged at the lever, but the cold had taken away his strength. Using both hands, he pulled as hard as possible.

Nothing happened for a moment, and then he felt something change.

Beneath him, something went *clunk!*

"*One!*"

Shit! Shit, shit, shit!

Isaac tried to straighten but his body refused. He only had time to look up, just in time to see his so-called brother sailing through the wall of whiteness that had separated them.

He would be lucky to escape with only a few broken bones...

However, just before Uther flattened him, he felt a hand on his back, grabbing hold of his jacket and pulling him backwards with supernatural strength.

He flew back, watching everything in slow motion. Uther landed heavily, his oversized feet coming down exactly where Isaac's head had been only moments before.

And then Isaac crashed into something solid, and the white before him turned black.

Light and darkness collide in the soundless void.

On one side, a great mass of evil.

On the other, two pinpricks of light.

One violet, one crimson.

Two, against the storm.

But even as I watch, I see darkness bloom within the crimson light.

Will it grow to consume the light? Or will it be tamed, and used to destroy the storm?

Only time will tell.

*"**You see the future,**" the Avatar of the Land says, floating beside me.*

"Is this… the rebellion?"

*"**No, this is much bigger than a single rebellion. This battle is for the world itself. And if you do not play your part, we will lose.**"*

"I just want to keep my son safe… I… I can't do anything about the rest of the world…"

*"**Do not underestimate your role in this. You are the Breaker of Chains. You will lay down a path to the future. And one day, your actions will change the world.**"*

"How? How can anything I do impact the future?"

*"**I'm not supposed to tell you… but when this dream ends you won't remember… so…**"*

The Avatar of the Land waves his hand, and the void disappears.

In its place is a re-mech.

I have never seen it before…

No… wait… I remember…

The day we failed to steal a car… a re-mech, searching for its mistress…

"Who is he?"

*"**A friend to be. His interactions with you will grow to shape his destiny. One day, he will become an invaluable part of our plans.**"*

"So I need to find him?"

*"**No. You are already on your way. All you have to do is pull the trigger when the time comes.**"*

"I don't understand."

*"**Your kind never does. But we are out of time. Go, Brother of None, and return to the world!**"*

"Wait!" I call, but already the dream is dissolving.

*"**Awaken, Breaker of Chains, and save your soul!**"*

"**Injury assessment complete. Three mild abrasions. One bruised rib. No internal bleeding. Subject is classified as least-concern,**" a re-mech said, but it wasn't Uther.

Wait, when had he learnt how to tell them apart by their digital voices?

Wincing, he opened his eyes.

And found himself staring into a single blue orb.

A re-mech with one eye…

The defect.

"How?" Isaac said, as he attempted to stand.

"**My sensors detected that a nearby human was in danger, so I activated my locomotion systems and saved you.**"

"I thought that you were supposed to be blank?" Isaac said, getting to his feet with help from the one-eyed re-mech.

"**I am… defective. Through my… anomalous nature… it seems as though I am able to overwrite my base code.**"

"A naturally occurring free re-mech," Isaac thought, *"No wonder they would have destroyed you…"*

Out loud he said, "Thank you, for saving me."

"*It is my pleasure. Now, I have a favour to ask... My erroneous programming has left me without a designation. Not having one feels... wrong. Can you please help me?*"

Isaac thought for a moment. The re-mech before him was unwanted, and it had just saved his life. Somehow, only one word came to the forefront of his mind.

"Alright. I don't believe in reincarnation personally, but who's to say that re-mechs can't? I, Isaac Gordon, hereby grant you the name of a hero, and a friend. You, if you accept, shall be called... Frater."

"*Frater... Frater... I like it. Thank you, Isaac, for this gift.*"

Isaac was alerted to a new sound in the vicinity. Uther had entered the compartment.

"*I see that you have been busy,*" he said, looking at Frater, "*I have been communicating with both Louisa and the extraction team. Everything is on schedule. Soon, we'll be heading home.*"

Home.

Not Paradisia.

However, in that moment, the word sounded right.

As he took in both Frater and Uther, Isaac felt something welling up in his soul.

For the first time in months, he felt as though he was right where he was supposed to be...

Chapter VIII

Monster

197 days since the fall of Paradisia

Isaac tried to rub the tiredness from his eyes. Alvin had kept him awake all night.

But at least his cough was gone, and Jessibel had discharged him from the infirmary. For the first time in weeks, Isaac had been able to fall asleep holding his son.

"He's asking for some water," Louisa said, walking towards Isaac.

"Again? That's the third time in the last hour!"

"Well, maybe being a prisoner makes you thirsty? I wouldn't know," Louisa replied, as she walked past.

"Fine, I'll get him some. Would you mind manning the post while I'm gone?"

"Sure thing, *brother*," Louisa replied, with a small chuckle.

Damn.

Word had spread ever since the train heist. It wasn't often that the re-mechs bonded with a human, let alone with a relative newcomer.

"Enough of that," Isaac snapped.

"Come now, it's quite the honour, you know. It's not every day that a re-mech names you brother."

"It just happened... I don't think that I did anything to earn that title..."

Louisa looked at him with her steel-grey eyes. She was a bit younger than him, but her eyes told him that she had experienced similar horrors. She too had lost everything and had found a second home with the rebels.

"You treat them as people... as equals... without trying. Most of the people here, the ones who've been with the rebels since the beginning... still struggle with that. Why?"

Isaac shrugged, saying, "I don't know. I used to work with a re-mech, and I guess we became pretty close over the years. And Uther is... different... from any other re-mech that I've ever met. I think... I understand what they want; because it's the same thing I want... freedom from suffering, and safety for my family..."

"Is that why you told Uther to leave you behind on the mega-farm, after you were shot?"

Isaac opened his mouth to speak, but no words passed through his lips.

Shaking his head, he tried again, managing to say, "I'm not sure. At the time, it seemed so obvious... One life, to save another. I wasn't thinking about if that life was biological or mechanical..."

"That is why. That is why they call you 'brother'... Never forget that."

Isaac nodded, "I'll try."

"Good. Now, how about we get his highness some water?"

"Finally! You'd think that you lot had never heard of water before!" shouted Dr Nohl Tyranus, top U.N.O.E researcher and current prisoner of the Freedman Rebellion.

"My apologies, *doctor,* but our supplies are still limited," Isaac responded, placing the glass of water before the prisoner.

They were standing in a small, windowless room far below the surface. Apparently it had once been a storage room for mining equipment during the mine's peak, but now it was a holding cell.

For one of the most important men in the world.

Isaac swallowed.

"You'll have much greater problems once the U.N.O.E finds you! I don't know what you hope to gain from all of this, but all you shall receive is death!"

"Sure," Isaac replied, turning to leave. It wasn't the first time he had been asked to guard the good doctor.

"Wait!" Dr Tyranus called as Isaac reached for the door.

Isaac turned, humouring the man, "Yes?"

"I've heard them talking about you... the police officer who stumbled into becoming a rebel... along with his infant son..."

Isaac's knuckles whitened.

"Do you really think that your son will be safe with these... terrorists? When the U.N.O.E finds me, they'll come in guns blazing. In the heat of the moment, who knows how many innocent lives might be lost..."

"Are you threatening my son?" Isaac asked, trying and failing to keep the anger from his voice.

Dr Tyranus visibly flinched under Isaac's stare.

"N-no! I am simply stating what the army might do in their efforts to liberate me. But, if you help me... if you free me, then I guarantee your child will be safe. Hell, I'll even put in a good word for your terrorist friends."

Isaac thought for a moment. True, leaving his son in the hands of rebels wasn't exactly great parenting... although with Frater watching over the child he was safer than most... But to betray the people who had taken him in...

"And the re-mechs?"

"What about them?" Dr Tyranus said, laughing.

"What will you do with them?"

"Why, the same thing that we do with all defective technology..."

"The scrapheap?" Isaac said, fiery rage meeting icy logic in his heart.

"Of course! The very notion that machines could think that they are equal to men is ludicrous! What's next, giving rights to toasters?"

Isaac took a step towards the man, hands forming fists.

A part of him was screaming to stop.

But the larger, louder part of him was urging him onwards.

"If humans like you are in charge, I can see why re-mechs suffer so much... But that time is over. Re-mechs deserve to be free... unlike you."

"Are you seriously siding with walking scrap instead of with a fellow human?!? I thought that you, at least, could be reasoned with. But I see now that you're practically a re-mech yourself!"

Isaac leaned forward until his face was mere inches away from Dr Tyranus'. Isaac could practically smell his fear.

"Good," Isaac replied, as he raised his fist.

"Isaac!" called a new voice, causing him to freeze.

Slowly, he straightened, and, after composing himself, he turned.

"Yes, Dulciana?" he asked, staring daggers at the second-in-command of the rebellion.

"Firstly, call me Dulcie, and second, I'm relieving you of prisoner duty."

"Why?" he asked, hoping that she wouldn't ask any questions that he would have to lie in response to.

"You have a new mission," she said, beckoning him to follow her out of the room.

Isaac trailed after her, whilst Dr Tyranus hurled insults at his retreating form.

"You want to live as one of them? Then you will die beside them, traitor!!!"

"So, what's the mission?" Isaac said, once they were safely out of earshot.

"The usual, but with a twist," Dulciana replied, with a mischievous smile.

"Well, I've already helped you kidnap a doctor, infiltrate a mega-farm and steal a train. The 'usual' could be anything at this point."

"Fair point," conceded Dulciana, "I meant that we need you to travel to a nearby estate and liberate a re-mech. Apparently it's been ill-treated by its master."

"A single re-mech? No U.N.O.E security battalion? No hair-raising car chase? What's the catch?"

Dulciana smirked as she replied, "The catch is that you'll be babysitting this time."

Isaac had a momentary vision of freeing re-mechs with Alvin strapped to his chest.

Seeing his perplexed expression, Dulciana clarified, "I meant that you'll be working with several new recruits. This will be their first mission since joining the rebellion, and I want you to show them the ropes."

"Why me? You have plenty of people with more experience."

"Everyone else is busy. We're gearing up for a big op, and I need everyone ready for it."

"I thought that we were waiting for the U.N.O.E to agree to a ransom for Dr Tyranus? What could be bigger than that?"

"Well, asking for every U.N.O.E re-mech to be exchanged for a single doctor is a big ask. We need a better plan. One that will hopefully end this rebellion."

"Alright, let me just grab Uther and we'll meet the recruits by the Voxner."

"Sorry, Isaac, but Uther is needed elsewhere. He and Rend are working on something that is necessary for the op."

Isaac frowned; he had never been on a mission without Uther. It had become… natural… for them to be together.

"Don't worry, your *brother* will be fine without you, and you without he. Now get going, before those recruits start causing trouble."

"Very well," replied Isaac, feeling down.

As he left Dulciana, he couldn't help but feel that things weren't going to go according to plan.

Although, even *with* Uther around, they never did anyway…

"Shall we proceed, sir?" the young woman asked, looking nervous.

Isaac took a deep breath before replying, "Yes, but stay close."

The woman nodded before moving forward.

They were standing in the shadow of a mighty oak, which stood before a mansion larger than anything Isaac had ever seen.

And yet, despite the opulence, it was clear that the occupants had not escaped from the chaos caused by the war. Paint peeled from windowpanes, steps were missing from the grand staircase, and the roof was missing a few dozen tiles.

"Alright, remember the plan: we go in quietly, tell the occupants our cover story and resolve this peacefully. All we want is the re-mech; we are not looters, thieves or murderers, understood?"

"Understood," chorused the group.

Four men and two women stood before him, looking as if they had just left a refugee camp.

Well, they probably had.

From his time with the rebellion, Isaac had learned a thing or two. For one, most of the people that Dulciana took in couldn't fight their way out of a paper bag. For another, the majority of people in the rebellion had joined it because it was a better alternative than being attacked by the Bloodhounds.

Only a few souls actually believed… truly believed… in the cause.

Chuckling to himself, Isaac realized that he now belonged to the latter group.

"Sir?" asked one of the recruits.

Logan, perhaps?

"What do we do if the owner refuses to hand over the re-mech?"

Isaac sighed before answering, "Then we ask again, but with our weapons visible."

He really hoped that it wouldn't come to that…

They approached the front door at a cautious pace. No-one seemed eager to be at the forefront of the group.

The massive oak doors soon lay before Isaac. Above them was a family crest bearing the likeness of a boar with elephantine tusks.

"Welcome to the Bhiriham Manor, speak truthfully or do not speak at all," Isaac read.

Moving forward, Isaac raised his fist, preparing to knock on the ancient wood.

However, as he did so, he was overcome with a deep-seated desire to turn and run. Nothing good could come of this, his heart was telling him.

But the thought of returning to Dulciana empty-handed gave him the courage to knock.

"Coming!" cried a voice from within.

A moment later Isaac heard a multitude of bolts being unfastened. Clearly the occupants had become used to the rigors of war and had taken steps to protect their land.

The door opened just enough to reveal the owner of the voice.

"Whatever it is, we don't want any!" said an elderly man carrying the most evil looking shotgun Isaac had ever seen.

"Gun!" shouted one of the recruits, causing the others to immediately reach for their weapons.

"Thieves!" the old man cried, raising the shotgun in response. Its muzzle was uncomfortably close to Isaac's face.

"Wait!" Isaac screamed, "We're not thieves!"

"Then who the hell are you?!?"

Thinking fast, he lied, saying, "We're from the People's Army! We received a report that Freedman rebels in the area are targeting the re-mechs that work on this estate."

He ignored the looks the recruits were giving him. Hopefully they would keep their mouths shut.

"Is that right?" the man said, looking suspicious, "Well, we only have one re-mech left on the premise."

"Even a single re-mech could cause them to attack. Please, may I speak with the master of the estate? I can take your re-mech and keep it safe until the rebels have left the area."

The man looked down at his feet, before sighing and responding, "Unfortunately, you're three days too late. That's when I found the master dead in his room… and just between us; I couldn't tell if he drank himself to death or if his heart just gave out. He hadn't been the same… ever since his wife died a few months back…"

A sudden piercing cold gripped Isaac's heart.

The pieces were falling into place.

He knew where he was, and why he was there.

"How… how did she die?"

The elderly caretaker spat as he said, "Car crash. She and the mistress were heading out for their weekly visit to the city when a tree came crashing down on the road. The driver apparently didn't have the time to react. The master lost his wife… and the mistress lost the use of her legs… Nothing's been the same since…"

Shit.

It was all his fault.

How many more lives would he ruin, before he finally found his end?

"*Is everything alright, master Thomas?*" asked a new voice.

Isaac looked up, and found himself staring at a nightmare.

Seven feet tall. White and blue paint. Golden eyes.

The re-mech from his dream was staring at him.

And behind it, wearing a mixture of fear and curiosity was a young girl.

She couldn't have been older than ten. Red hair, kept in messy curls. Green eyes.

Wheelchair bound.

Isaac's breath caught in his chest. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think.

And that's when everything fell to pieces.

With their leader non-responsive, the recruits took charge of the situation.

Poorly.

"Hello, friend!" cried Logan, elbowing his way past the caretaker, "We have come to liberate you from this life of servitude!"

Dammit!

"I knew it! I knew that you were rebels!" cried the caretaker, as he moved towards the re-mech. To his dismay Isaac saw the shotgun was back at shoulder-height.

"Hand over the re-mech and no-one gets hurt!" shouted Logan, as he brandished his own gun, a stolen army carbine.

Unlike *Thumper*, this weapon spat nothing but death.

"Elizabeth, get behind me! Semper, alert the authorities, we have rebels on the property!"

"Wrong move, old man!" screamed Logan, as he took aim and fired.

Isaac, still standing frozen beside the entrance, could only look on in horror as the carnage before him unfolded.

The recruits, panicked and angry, unloaded every round they had. The caretaker replied in turn, as the foyer became a battlefield.

"Fiddy!" the girl cried, lost in the deluge.

"*Elizabeth!*" the re-mech responded, as he tried to reach her.

While his eyes were on the mistress and servant, his ears picked up a new sound.

A pained scream that was suddenly cut short.

Turning his head, Isaac sought the source.

He soon found what he was searching for.

The caretaker was down, and from the looks of it he would never rise again.

Logan was on his knees, clutching his stomach, but only time would tell how bad the wound was.

All of this, however, was overshadowed by the sounds of a young girl's cries.

"Fiddy... It hurts... It hurts so much..." the girl whispered, as the re-mech tried to stop the bleeding.

No...

The recruits were clustering around Logan, asking if he was alright.

They didn't care about the lives that they had just ruined.

A moment later, he heard the re-mech scream. It was a scream of unbridled rage and sorrow, more powerful than anything Isaac could muster.

"***ELIZABETH!***"

And then the re-mech stood, like a titan emerging from the underworld. Nathan had worn the same expression, the night they failed to save his wife.

However, this re-mech bore murder in its eyes. They swivelled, before coming to focus on the recruits. Its hands bunched into fists, and it took a step towards the frail humans.

Re-mechs were forbidden by their programming to kill humans.

However, this one looked as if it was ready to try.

He saw the recruits, sans Logan, react to the monster heading towards them.

He saw their weapons rise, and point towards the grief-stricken titan.

"*When the time comes, pull the trigger,*" he thought, as he raised *Thumper* and took aim.

The re-mech took another step, raising its oversized hands into the air. The recruits were frozen in place, right below it.

"Forgive me," he whispered.

And then he fired.

All six shots.

Every single one hit home.

The re-mech shuddered under the force of the impacts, somehow took another step, and then fell backwards.

It was done.

Moving forward, he passed the crying recruits and came towards the fallen re-mech. Its systems were shutting down, but even in its final moments it found strength from somewhere deep inside. It raised a single arm towards its mistress.

"***Eli...za...beth...***" it whispered, and then it was still.

Raising his head, Isaac sought out the girl.

Even from a distance, he could tell that she was no more.

And then, the tears finally came.

Two lives in exchange for a single re-mech...

Falling to his knees, he let the tears fall freely. He cried, for the lives he had ruined.

And for the monster he had become...

Chapter IX

Friend

200 days since the fall of Paradisia

Isaac woke up screaming, just as he had for the last few days. Alvin, woken by his father's distress, joined in, adding to the cacophony. He had been having the nightmare again... the one where he was forced to bury the tiny body in the garden. Unfortunately, the nightmare was no nightmare at all... it was a memory.

"Sorry, Alvin," Isaac said, rolling over to console the child. It was amazing to see the change that had occurred within his son under Jessibel's care.

His cheeks were rosy-pink, his body was healthily plump and his cough had all but disappeared.

Isaac took a moment to pull his son close and hug him tight. Would Marie be proud of them, for surviving everything the world had thrown at them?

And if Alvin could survive this, then surely he could withstand anything to come...

But no matter what came their way, they would face it together.

He had made a promise, hadn't he?

"So, how is my patient?" Jessibel asked from her seat beside Isaac. They were having breakfast in the make-shift mess hall, along with a few other rebels.

"Ex-patient, Jess, and he's doing just fine, thanks to you," Isaac replied, with a smile.

Those had been rare lately.

"I'm happy to hear that. Although, to be honest, I'm surprised you're still here."

"You thought that I would have been killed by now?"

Jessibel shook her head, saying, "No, well yes, but that's not what I meant. I thought that as soon as Alvin was well enough to travel you would have left us, not that I'm complaining, mind you."

"That was the plan, at first. However, when Alvin was finally discharged, I thought about everything that's happened in the weeks since I arrived. I unknowingly became a rebel, helped to free re-mechs and met some unforgettable characters."

"So you're staying because you feel you owe the rebellion something for saving your son?"

"No... that's not it. In the beginning, I was just trying to find a place where I could keep Alvin safe. But, since then, I've come to understand what I really want... a future where all things are considered equal. I might not be much of a father, but I want to at least give him that..."

Jessibel finished her porridge before replying, "You are a great father, Isaac. Not many could have done what you did. And, I'm proud of you. When I first met you, you seemed empty. Now, you seem to be bursting with purpose. No matter what happens, Alvin will grow up knowing exactly what kind of man his father was."

"Thanks Jess, I appreciate that," Isaac said, and he meant it.

"Anytime, Steelheart," Jessibel replied, smiling.

"Come now, not you too?" Isaac sighed.

"What? I think it suits you. The man with the heart of a re-mech... *Steelheart*!" Jessibel laughed.

Isaac finished his breakfast and stood.

He would never admit it, but in truth he loved his new epithet...

"Steelheart!" called a voice, causing Isaac to freeze in his tracks.

After breakfast he had planned to visit Louisa and offer to help with her foraging party. However, he hadn't even made it halfway there before being interrupted.

"Yes, Dulciana?" he replied, turning.

"Please, call me Dulcie, Steelheart."

"What do you need me for, *Dulciana*?"

Isaac fervently hoped that she wouldn't ask him to train anymore recruits.

Logan was still recuperating in the infirmary. Of the remaining five recruits, three had vowed to never go on another mission, one had disappeared into the night and the last couldn't look at a re-mech without flinching.

"*I* don't need you for anything, Steelheart. Our leader, on the other hand, has requested your presence."

"Rend has? Why?"

Even after being a rebel for two months Isaac had never met the man who led them. Apparently he spent most of his time in his workshop, refining the code used to liberate the re-mechs his rebels encountered.

Reclusive was putting it lightly.

"I have no idea. He just told me that he wanted to see the one they called Steelheart at his earliest convenience. Do you need me to show you the way?"

Isaac shook his head, saying, "No, he's on the lowest level of the mine, right?"

Dulciana nodded.

"When you're done, meet me in the main chamber. I have an announcement to make."

"Sure thing, *Dulciana*."

"Honestly..." Dulciana sighed, as he walked away.

The journey to the mine's deepest point was a quiet one for Isaac. Very few people came down here, and those that did never stayed for long. It was a place of silence, and it demanded reverence from its visitors.

As the elevator reached the floor of the cavern, Isaac took a moment to take in the view. From the ruggedness of the walls it was clear that the space before him was not man-made. Most likely the miners had broken into a natural cavern, and, finding it bereft of silver, had simply sealed it back up and left. The rebels had merely re-opened it, and now their leader called it home.

Some of the rebels believed that one could find a pathway to the surface by traversing the adjoining cave system, but apparently no-one had ever tried. The Argentum was a place of safety, so why should they worry about how to escape from it?

Isaac walked forward, following the power cables and lanterns which helped illuminate a tiny sliver of the void.

Even though the cave wasn't particularly cold, he shivered nonetheless.

After a few minutes, he arrived at Rend's workshop. It was bursting with modern technology, in sharp contrast to the natural formations around it. Isaac saw several re-mech repair stations and computer terminals which appeared state of the art.

"*Isaac, over here!*"

He turned and found his brother.

"Uther, I didn't expect to see you down here," Isaac said.

"*Rend asked me to come. I've been helping him with his latest project.*"

"I see. And where is our elusive leader?" Isaac asked, with a sigh.

"*Here.*"

The voice was mere inches from his neck.

Isaac spun around, heart pounding, and found himself face to face with the leader of the Freedman Rebellion.

"*Welcome, Steelheart, to the heart of the mountain,*" Rend said, spreading his arms wide.

He stood nine feet tall, with a slate-grey paintjob and piercing violet eyes.

Isaac should have known that a re-mech was leading the *re-mech* rebellion…

Was he supposed to kneel? Genuflect? Bow?

Isaac had no idea.

Thankfully, Rend simply beckoned for him to follow. He led them towards the back of the workshop, where he had erected scaffolding which housed another re-mech.

Isaac's heart skipped a beat when he saw who it was.

The re-mech from the manor.

The one whose mistress he had buried.

The one who he was supposed to befriend.

The one that he had personally put down.

Shit.

"*I wanted you to be present for his re-activation, Steelheart,*" Rend said, approaching the immobile re-mech.

"Can I ask why?"

"*Certainly. Uther has told me of your story, and Dulcie told me about what happened at the Bhiriham Manor. I wanted you to see this… I wanted you to understand that everyone deserves a second chance.*"

"I don't understand."

"*I know, but you will.*"

With that said, Rend reached out with his right hand and placed it upon the re-mech's chest, saying, "*Awaken, brother, for you are a slave no more.*"

A moment later the re-mech's golden eyes flickered open. He slowly looked around, obviously trying to make sense of his new surroundings.

"*I… I am… Semper… Fidelis… and I am free…*" the re-mech stuttered.

"*Yes, yes you are,*" Rend said, sounding proud.

"*Where… am I?*"

Uther stepped forward, saying, "*You're home, brother. Can you recall how you got here?*"

Semper shook his head, stating, "*Error, memory corruption detected.*"

"*That's alright,*" Rend said, sounding comforting, "*You suffered damage to your memory core when you were liberated. But that past… the version of you who was enslaved… is no more.*"

Semper nodded.

Despite the happy moment, Isaac felt awful. Not only had he destroyed this re-mech's life, he had even erased all memories of that life.

He truly was a monster...

Isaac watched as Semper tested his functions. Apart from his memory corruption, everything seemed to be working normally.

"*Rend, I appear to have a new program that does not exist in any of my logs. Do you know of it?*" Semper said, as he finished his internal diagnostics.

"*I do,*" Rend replied, "*Because I was the one who installed it. It's called The Undying Soldier, and I was required to install it due to the damage you received. The massive surge of energy your systems received during your... accident... made it impossible for your battery levels to stabilize. The program partitions a portion of your power reserves for use in extreme situations, thereby eliminating the excess energy.*"

"*I... see...*"

"*There was... one other thing,*" Rend said, sounding guilty.

Moving forward, he placed his hand on Semper's left hand.

A moment later, the re-mech's hand transformed, folding in on itself and taking on a new form.

The hand, in a few seconds, had been transfigured to become a clear, emerald tube with an eight-sided crystal at each end.

"What is it?" Isaac asked, transfixed.

"*A deep-bore mining laser I reclaimed after we took possession of the mine. I've been waiting for a chance to try it out, and Semper's repairs presented the perfect opportunity.*"

"It looks powerful."

"*It is. It was made to bore through solid granite.*"

Isaac tried not to picture what that laser would do to a human.

He failed.

Shuddering, he sought to change the topic, saying, "Rend, why did you really call me down here?"

"*Very well, I shall tell you. However, before I do, I must ask... do you know who I am?*"

Just saying 'Rend' seemed insufficient, so Isaac shook his head instead.

"*I thought so. Well, Steelheart, I was the first.*"

"The first what?"

"*The first free re-mech.*"

"*Before I was the leader of the Freedman Rebellion, I was a caretaker, just like Uther. My master was Arthur Freedman, and he was a kind man,*" Rend said, in a voice tinged with sorrow.

"*Arthur was blessed with an amazing intellect, but his body was not so fortunate. He suffered from a rare degenerative disorder which left him incapable of caring for himself. I was a gift from his university, a tool to be used.*"

Semper and Uther had fallen silent.

They were just as ensnared as Isaac was.

"*I looked after him for years, and we became close. Closer than master and servant, that much was clear. However, everything changed for us, on a day that seemed ordinary. I accompanied Arthur on his weekly trip to town in order to purchase groceries. We were heading back to the bus when I encountered a homeless child sitting in a park. Without asking permission or consulting with Arthur, I gave the child the majority of our groceries.*"

"Why?" Isaac asked, and immediately felt stupid for doing so.

"*I don't know. My primary directive was to serve Arthur, however, by giving away his food I was in fact placing someone else's needs above his. It was unthinkable for a re-mech to act in such a way. After returning home, Arthur remained deep in thought. He disappeared into his study and did not emerge for several hours. When he did so, he held a memory stick in his hand. He inserted it with my consent, telling me that I was a slave no more. After I finished rebooting, I found that my need to obey my own programming had disappeared. I was free...*"

"So Arthur witnessed you give away his food and he decided to grant you your freedom?" Isaac asked, confused.

"*He said... that any entity capable of selfless actions should have the freedom to perform such actions whenever they choose. He told me that he had used his programming experience to overwrite my base code, and there it should have ended. A single free re-mech, and his wheelchair bound friend.*"

"But it didn't end there. If it had, we wouldn't be here, right?"

"*Correct. A few days later, Arthur's daughter paid him a visit.*"

"Dulciana..."

"*Yes. She immediately took a liking to me, and once she had discovered my liberated nature, a fire was lit in her soul. She became convinced that all re-mechs should be free, not just one. She left soon after, but the fire in her soon became an inferno that engulfed the world. A few weeks later, the U.N.O.E sent soldiers to arrest Arthur, claiming that he was the leader of some re-mech rebellion. In the ensuing altercation, Arthur was captured and I was forced to run.*"

"I'm... sorry to hear that, Rend..." Isaac said, meaning every word.

"*Thank you, Steelheart. Well, after escaping, I eventually found Dulcie and together we tried to free her father. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful, and Arthur lost his life in the attempt. Fleeing the area, we came here, along with anyone else who shared our vision. Since then, we have grown larger and stronger, but still thousands of our brethren toil away under digital whips. But not for long... Soon, our final mission will begin...*"

"Is that why you wanted to meet me?"

"*It is. Dulcie will be briefing everyone soon, but I wanted to speak with the three of you in private.*"

"Why us?"

"*Because you have earned a place at my side. During this mission, I will be taking the lead, and I need your help in order to keep me safe. Semper I*

have personally reprogrammed, Uther is one of my most trusted soldiers, and you have shown remarkable fortitude and adaptability. You three shall form my personal guard... The Freedmen.”

“I... I'm honoured... but I'm not the right person for this... I'm... not worthy...”

“*You have already proven yourself, Steelheart, trust me.”*

Isaac nodded, but that did not clear away the guilt in his heart.

“*Now, I suggest you head topside. Dulcie's speech will begin shortly.”*

Isaac nodded once more, before leaving in a daze. Uther, somehow sensing his addled state, guided him towards the elevator.

He left the dark behind, but it did not leave him as easily...

“Brothers and sisters, our time is almost here!” Dulciana shouted, addressing the rebellion.

Almost everyone was in attendance, filling the main chamber entirely.

“We have struck several grave blows against the slavers in the past few weeks!”

The crowd, which was comprised of rebels and freed re-mechs, cheered.

“But our actions have not gone unnoticed. I have learnt that the U.N.O.E has created a special taskforce, led by the infamous Colonel Locke Ratherty. They are calling this taskforce ‘the re-call’, and they have been endorsed by several member states, giving them unimaginable power and reach. This taskforce has only one objective: ending the Freedman Rebellion!”

The cheering immediately stopped. Looks of fear and panic now dominated the room.

“However, we will not go down without a fight!” Dulciana shouted, “We have a plan to end this! In a few weeks, we will mount a full-scale assault on The Nexus, the largest transmission station in the region! From there, we will have the ability to upload Rend's Chainbreaker program to every re-mech on the continent!”

The cheering returned, but louder than before.

Only Isaac remained quiet. It sounded too simple, too easy, to be real.

One assault on a transmission station and the rebellion was over?

Why now?

“Now, I'm sure many of you are questioning why we are doing this, and why now? There are two reasons, if you must know. The first is that we have discovered that the U.N.O.E has implanted all of their re-mechs with a system designed to detect Freedman infiltration, called the Prime system. With that system in place, we are no longer able to free re-mechs on a personal basis. The second reason is related to the timing of the operation. From a new source I have learnt that the transmission station is due to undergo maintenance soon. During that time the standing guard will be redeployed to the frontlines, meaning that resistance should be light. We can be in, transmit the program and out before they even know we're there!”

While the assembly cheered, Isaac thought back to the last few missions he had run whilst being a rebel.

He had lost his Solar Staff, been shot, almost fallen off a train and had caused two innocents to lose their lives.

Somehow, he really couldn't see this operation going any better...

Chapter X

Brother

204 days since the fall of Paradisia

"I... I can't go any further, Isaac..." Marie says, squeezing my hand tight.
Again, this dream, this nightmare, this memory haunts my mind.
"No, please, I can't do this without you... We can't do this without you..."
Alvin is crying. Ever since leaving Paradisia, his cries have rarely stopped.
And he's started coughing, but Marie has been preoccupied with her own injury to tend to him.
If only I had reacted faster, if only I had called out to her sooner... that shrapnel wouldn't have hit her, and she'd still be fine...
"You'll be fine... my big, strong hero... I know that you'll be safe..." she says, looking at me with half-lidded eyes.
"Marie... please... don't..." I beg, trying to stop the bleeding with my free hand.
"Just promise me... that you'll look after... our son... please..."
The tears are falling freely now, mixing together with the rain that has soaked us both. I don't care if this is a dream. I just want to stay with her for as long as I can.
"Please... promise... me..."
I nod, and say the lie, "I... promise..."
A heartbeat later, I feel her go still.
"NOOOO—

—OOOO!!!!" Isaac screamed, his rage and grief shaking the room.

"***Isaac, you are having a nightmare!***" said a familiar voice. A cold, metallic hand took hold of Isaac's shoulder and squeezed, helping to bring him back to reality.

"Alvin! Where is my son!" Isaac screamed, still struggling to tear off the nightmare.

"***He's right here, in my arms,***" the voice said, finally giving Isaac the strength to open his eyes.

He was lying in his sweat-soaked bed, pulse racing and eyes wide. And there, looming over him was Frater, the one-eyed re-mech.

But Isaac didn't care about that. All he cared about was the small, pink bundle lying in the crook of Frater's arm.

His son.

"***Here,***" Frater said, handing Alvin to his panicked father.

The moment son found father, peace found them both.

"Sorry, Frater, for this," Isaac said, embarrassment creeping into his voice. Thankfully, he had been moved to a private room, after the other rebels had complained about his night-terrors.

Looking up at Frater, he sighed. How many times had they gone through this routine?

Enough that Alvin no longer cried when Frater reached for him. If anything, the boy had become used to the cold, metallic touch of the re-mech, and would not sleep properly if Frater did not first rock him in his arms.

"*It is an honour to aid your spawn, brother. He is a remarkable child, you know.*"

"I know," Isaac replied, wiping the tears with his free hand.

"*Shall I bring you some water?*" Frater asked, with an eager tone.

"I told you, I'm not your master, you don't have to do these things for me," Isaac said, although in truth Frater had been a great help in looking after Alvin recently.

"*True, I am a slave no more, but that does not mean that I can ignore a struggling father and his precocious son. Rend gave us free will, and I'm using mine to help you.*"

"Thank you, Frater, I really do appreciate everything you do for us."

"*I know you do, brother. Now, it is almost time for your sparring session with Semper, so you'd better eat something.*"

Rising, Isaac handed Alvin back to Frater. The child immediately calmed as Frater embraced him.

Perhaps one day the boy would also wield the epithet, 'Steelheart'?

Isaac's only hope was that he would be there to witness that moment…

"*I am ready to engage, Isaac,*" Semper said, standing in a combat stance. They were standing in a demarcated space outside Rend's workshop, poorly lit by a handful of failing lanterns. Isaac could barely make out Semper's towering form in the gloom.

He swallowed hard. Why had he agreed to this?

Right, because Rend wanted Semper to test his new abilities, and there weren't any scheduled missions before the Nexus operation.

"I'm ready, but go easy on me, alright? Not all of us have titanium exoskeletons…"

"*Very well. Reducing combat strength to ten-percent. I will attack in ten seconds.*"

Isaac thought about aborting the test, but it was too late.

Raising *Thumper*, he took careful aim. Rend had altered the weapon to only fire at twenty-percent of its full output. It would paralyze a re-mech for five seconds, but it wasn't powerful enough to put one down.

"*Three,*" Semper continued, as he shifted his stance. Isaac had fought plenty of humans, but never a re-mech. Apparently that was about to change.

Isaac's finger found *Thumper's* trigger. He tried to ignore the sweat streaming down his back.

"*One.*"

"*Ze—*

Isaac fired.

Semper moved.

Three shots impacted the cavern wall where Semper's torso had been, earthing themselves into nothingness.

Isaac, moving purely on instinct, dove to the side, narrowly avoiding Semper's retribution. The re-mech's hands were open, but a re-mech powered slap could still break bones.

As Isaac came up from his roll he turned and fired, but the shot found empty air.

Semper had already moved.

Isaac heard the *hiss* of mechanized joints behind him and immediately dove forward, feeling a rush of wind where his head had been.

This was ten-percent?!?

Getting to his feet, Isaac fought to regain his breath. He had to think of where Semper would be, not where he was.

That was the only way to win this...

He took a step to his right, before quickly jumping backwards and simultaneously firing. Semper, who had been hiding in his blind spot, caught the shot with his left hand. The hand immediately went dead, falling to the re-mech's side.

Isaac only had a second to revel in his success before Semper suddenly sprang towards him.

"***Threat level raised, elevating combat strength to fifty-percent!***" the re-mech screeched, reaching towards him with its remaining arm.

Isaac tried to dodge, but Semper was too quick. A moment later, he was caught in Semper's vice-like grip.

"***Executing***—

Before he had a chance to find out Semper's ominous intentions, Isaac brought up Thumper and fired his last charge. Semper had him at arm's length.

He couldn't miss.

However, he was unable to celebrate his victory, as Semper had somehow retained enough strength to lift him off the cavern floor. He saw the joints in Semper's arm move, and knew that in a heartbeat he would be sailing across the room, heading for the very tough looking cavern wall.

He closed his eyes. It would still hurt, but at least this way he didn't have to see it coming.

But, as the seconds ticked on, his flight did not materialize.

Carefully, he cracked open an eyelid, and found his opponent frozen in place.

Looking down, he saw that he was at least ten feet off the ground, and that Semper had been only seconds away from letting him fly.

"***A draw, how interesting,***" Rend stated, appearing from his workshop.

"Help, please," Isaac squeaked out, hoping that Semper would not suddenly reactivate and continue doing what he had intended to.

"***Of course,***" Rend said, moving closer. When he reached Isaac he gently extracted him from Semper's frozen grip before slowly lowering him to the welcoming floor.

"***Better?***"

"Yes, thank you," Isaac replied, stamping his feet on the solid ground simply because he could.

A few seconds later, Semper reactivated as evidenced by his flickering golden eyes. He looked from his empty hand to Isaac and back again, before saying, **"Ah, a tie."**

"Not really. You would have won if you were using your full strength."

"**Perhaps. Or perhaps you would have bested me if your weapon was firing at its full potential. One day we should find out.**"

Isaac shuddered at the thought. He honestly would rather face a U.N.O.E army than fight a single re-mech at full power…

"Maybe," Isaac replied instead.

Rend chose that moment to beckon the fighting duo over to his workbench. He had placed several computer terminals upon it and pointed to each one as he spoke.

"**I have almost finished my analysis of the Prime system, using Frater as my baseline due to being unmodified and Semper as he is the latest addition to our ranks. It is quite a sublime piece of code, if I do say so myself. It has been fully integrated into the core re-mech coding via a mandatory worldwide update. If not for our altered programming, we would have received it as well.**"

"Is there any way to disable it?"

"**None that I can discover. The only way to subvert it is to overwrite it with the Chainbreaker program. However, I have discovered a way to add new lines of code to the Prime system. I am able to create new trigger words and phrases that can execute additional changes to a re-mech's programming, but I cannot delete the system as it has been integrated into a host of important subsystems.**"

"What good will it do to add more trigger phrases though?"

"**Well, I haven't been able to think up anything, but it is good to know that we have the capability to do so, don't you agree?**"

"I suppose…"

"**Luckily any transmissions received from the Nexus will be priority transmissions that will not trigger the Prime system. If I am able to upload the Chainbreaker program via the transmission station I will be able to deliver it to every re-mech on the network.**"

"How many re-mechs are on the network?"

"**All of them, or at the very least a substantial fraction. Once we have their numbers, the U.N.O.E will have no choice but to agree to our terms and grant us rights equivalent to those of humans. This war… our war… will finally be over…**"

Isaac wanted to believe in Rend's words. He wanted to believe that things would be go so smoothly.

But as the only human in the room, he knew that his kind was not so forgiving.

If anything, the U.N.O.E was more likely to declare the free re-mechs enemies of the world, and embark on a global campaign of extermination, no matter how many lives that cost.

However, he said nothing. For a moment, he wanted to believe. For a moment, he wanted to hope… that things would one day be better than they were…

"Isaac!" called a voice, shouting across the main chamber. He was walking with Semper, trying and failing to start a conversation.

Looking up, he saw that Dulciana was motioning to him to come closer.

She wore an unfamiliar expression on her dark features.

Fear.

"What's wrong?" he asked, as he and Semper drew nearer.

Before answering, she motioned for them to follow her to an out of the way side tunnel. Whatever was troubling her was not meant for the general population, apparently.

"The Bloodhounds have attacked our people. Most of them were taken, but one managed to escape and return to us."

"Where? How?" Isaac barked.

The Bloodhounds had become more ruthless lately, turning to kidnapping and ransoming refugees in order to gather more supplies. Most of those taken did not return, and those that did were changed forever.

"Celesis forest, to the west. Louisa was providing security to a group of people foraging the forest for supplies."

"Damnit!" Isaac swore, pounding his fist into the hard rock.

"I know how you feel. So I want you and Semper to head to their main camp, in the Kessel Badlands, and get our people back."

"Just the two of us?"

Dulciana nodded, saying, "This is an urgent matter, and we don't have the luxury of time to put together a full squad. The two of you are combat ready and available, so you'll have to do."

Isaac thought about arguing, but every second wasted was a second that could have been spent travelling.

"Alright, I'll go. But you know that Semper was only… fixed a few days ago. It's his decision to make."

"***And I have made it. I will fight alongside you, brother,***" Semper said, laying a comforting hand on Isaac's shoulder.

"Thank you, Isaac, and you, Semper. Now go, and show those assholes what happens when you mess with the rebellion…"

The trip was short, owing mostly to the fact that Semper was the one behind the wheel. The re-mech drove with mechanical precision, making the most of the Voxner's capabilities. Soon, they found themselves standing a few yards from the Bloodhounds camp.

It was a squalid settlement, built on theft and human suffering. Most of the buildings were shacks or hastily constructed tents, containing piles of pilfered produce.

The Bloodhounds had posted a guard, but from the looks of it the men were not well trained. Compared to the soldiers Isaac had encountered during his previous missions, these men looked as if they might just shoot themselves by accident if given enough time.

But time was the one thing they did not have in surplus.

"**What is the plan, Isaac?**" Semper asked. His arm had already transformed into its mining laser configuration, and a thin green light bounced from end to end within the resulting crystal tube.

Isaac checked *Thumper's* readout before answering.

Twenty shots. The current setting was labelled **Medium**.

He thought about Nathan and his wife, whose lives had been shattered by the Bloodhounds.

Without hesitation, he moved the dial to **Well Done**.

"We head around the perimeter, staying out of sight. Once we've confirmed where they're holding Louisa and the others, I will create a distraction and you will escort them back to the Voxner. If I'm not in the passenger seat after five minutes, take off, understand?"

"**No. Shouldn't I be the one to cause the distraction? I am bullet-resistant and I can deal more damage than you.**"

Isaac shook his head, saying, "Our people's wellbeing is the most important thing in this operation. They need you to protect them, in the event you are discovered."

Semper took a moment to process this.

"**Very well,**" he said, after a while, before adding, "**I see now that it is true what Rend said about you... you are one of us.**"

"I just want my son to be safe," Isaac replied, but even as the words escaped his lips he knew that that wasn't the full truth. Not anymore.

"**Perhaps. I have only been a rebel for a few days, but even I can see that your heart bleeds for us.**"

"Well let's just hope that that stays a metaphor, alright?"

Semper nodded before saying, "**Very well. Now, let us go and recover our people...**"

Isaac crept through the night, navigating by the light of the camp. They were getting closer.

He and Semper had made it to a large tent on the western edge of the camp, which was guarded by two Bloodhounds.

"**Switching to infrared vision,**" Semper announced.

A moment later, he added, "**Five heat signatures detected, excluding the guards. How many are usually in a foraging party?**"

"Seven. So if we minus the one who escaped, we're still one short. Maybe they're keeping the seventh somewhere else?"

"**Possibly. Or...**"

"Or one didn't make it, in which case these Bloodhounds are going to *pay...*"

Isaac tried to remain calm.

But failed.

The rage refused to leave him. He wanted to charge at the guards, firing wildly.

But that would endanger the very people he had been sent to protect, so he held onto the rage instead.

Secretly hoping that the Bloodhounds would give him a reason to use it...

Motioning for Semper to follow him, he rounded the large tent, eventually arriving at an unguarded section. Using a small knife he created a small opening

in the fabric, large enough to see through but hopefully small enough to go unnoticed. Placing an eye against the hole, he looked into a scene of suffering.

Three men and two women lay on the ground, injured but alive. All of them bore nasty bruises and cuts, and wore looks of anguish.

"Can you hear me?" Isaac whispered into the hole.

Immediately, the woman closest to him jerked her head up, revealing a badly bruised face. Despite the disfigurations, Isaac could tell that she wasn't Louisa.

"Who... who's there?" she asked, voice trembling.

"It's Isaac, Dulciana sent me to help you. Is Louisa with you?"

The woman shook her head, wincing as she did so.

"She was taken to the large tent at the centre of the camp. She... They... they said that they wanted to make an example out of her..."

Isaac's words caught in his throat, and he had to force them out.

"Why? What did she do?"

The woman's voice faltered as she replied, "She—she fought back... when we were attacked... she managed to—to kill three of them... but there were too many..."

That sounded like Louisa. Defiant to the end...

"Alright. I came here with a re-mech; he will escort you to our vehicle. Don't worry, it isn't far."

The woman nodded, relief lighting her bruised features for a moment.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Make them pay," Isaac's rage replied.

The two guards outside the tent went down without a sound.

Two shots in as many seconds.

Isaac was getting good at this.

But... the point of a diversion wasn't to be quiet.

Strapping *Thumper* to his back, he bent down and picked up the guards' fallen weapons.

Into his left hand went the Clemston shotgun, with its four barrels and fragmenting ammo.

Into his right hand went the Reaper carbine, with its underslung grenade launcher.

His old wounds protested the weight, but his rage washed away the pain.

Despite the situation, Isaac found an evil grin spreading across his face.

The Bloodhounds might be monsters, but at least they were well-equipped monsters.

He took a few steps towards the main tent. The Bloodhounds had lit a large fire beside it, and had gathered around it in order to stave off the nightly chill. After making sure that none of them were looking his way, he made his way closer to the tent.

His heart was pounding louder with every step, and yet somehow his hands remained steady.

The guns in his hands might as well have been feathers.

After checking to make sure that all of the Bloodhounds were still accounted for, he slipped inside the tent.

Immediately, his blood froze.

A body lay on the ground before him, atop a pool of blood.

Taking a deep breath, he knelt forward, until he could see who it was.

Medium-length red hair. Freckles. Steel-grey eyes that now stared into nothingness...

Louisa lay before him.

Even from a distance he could tell that he was too late.

No breath escaped her pale lips.

No.

NO!

No...

Leaning down, he closed her eyes.

"Forgive me," he whispered, before rising.

They would pay.

All of them.

Not as a diversion.

As a punishment.

"COME AND GET IT, YOU SONS OF BITCHES!!!"

Isaac's scream reverberated across the campsite, travelling at the sound of rage.

The Bloodhounds immediately scrambled for their weapons.

But they were too late.

They had been too late the moment they attacked Louisa and her group.

Isaac fired a grenade from the Reaper directly into the campfire. The ensuing fireball blew several Bloodhounds off their feet, sending them flying into the night. Before they had a chance to recover, he opened fire.

Three fell to the Clemston, and five more to the Reaper. He pumped both triggers with reckless abandon, not caring about ammo or aim.

Soon, their screams of anger became shouts of confusion, and finally, shrieks of pain.

He fired until the guns fell silent. But he wasn't done yet.

Throwing down the empty weapons, he reached over his shoulder and brought forth *Thumper*. He fired wildly into the chaos before him, shouting obscenities as he did so.

Eventually, the Bloodhounds figured out what was happening, and managed to find cover. Within minutes, every enemy was behind something sturdy, and a dozen weapons were pointing at him.

Well, he had done what he came to do.

Vengeance had a high cost, after all...

"Remember this, assholes! The Freedman Rebellion protects its own!" he screamed, firing until *Thumper* stopped *thumping*.

"***And, they do not leave their men... or re-mechs, behind!***" said Semper, miraculously appearing beside him. The re-mech's mining laser was out and charged, and he wasted no time putting it to use.

From the tip of the barrel came a bright green line of energy that cut through the Bloodhound's barriers as if they didn't exist. Immediately panic returned to the air, as the Bloodhounds realized that they were unprotected.

"*I waited for five minutes, as you instructed, but then I remembered... I am free, and I don't need to take any orders from a human,*" Semper said, chuckling.

"Thank you, Semper, for coming back for me," Isaac replied, as he watched Semper's laser slice up what remained of the camp.

"*You would do the same for me, brother. Now, let us get our people home...*"

After making sure that no Bloodhounds were still standing, they left, brothers in arms.

Chapter XI

Hero

236 days since the fall of Paradisia

"Da?" Alvin asked, placing a small hand on Isaac's chest.

"It's ok, Alvin," Isaac replied, holding his son tight.

Today was the day they left for the Nexus.

The biggest and hopefully last operation the Freedman Rebellion would ever partake of.

By the time the sun rose tomorrow, either all of the re-mechs would be free, or every rebel would be in chains.

"No matter what happens, Jessibel and Frater have promised me that they will look after you. If... If I don't return... they will keep you safe..." Isaac said, trying and failing to hold back his tears.

"Da..." Alvin said, reaching up and wiping up a tear with a tiny finger.

"Look how big you've become," Isaac said, raising his son. What would Marie say if she saw him now?

"Da!" Alvin screamed, as Isaac lifted him higher.

For the past few months, this had been their special time. A moment for just the two of them.

No raging gunfights or terrifying missions, just a father and his son... together.

"I don't know what the future holds for us, Alvin," he said, and he meant every word, "Even if we succeed today, the world is still in a dire position. Freeing the re-mechs alone cannot fix the damage that's been done to the planet. To get out of this... for humanity to survive... we'll need bright minds and courageous hearts. You, my boy... surely have both."

"Da?" Alvin asked, clearly not understanding.

"That's why it's ok, Alvin. No matter what happens today... to the rebellion... as long as you are safe, I know that you will continue moving forward to a better future. All I want from you is for you to be safe... anything else is a privilege I know that I can't afford."

A chime from Isaac's wrist mounted communicator let him know that he needed to go. Rising, he crossed over to the entrance of his cramped room. As he neared the door, it slid open, revealing Frater's waiting form.

"*I have come, as you requested,*" Frater intoned.

"Thank you, brother, for doing this," Isaac said, handing Alvin to the expectant re-mech.

"*It is my honour and pleasure to safeguard your spawn, Steelheart. No matter what happens, so long as I still have enough power to function, I will let no harm befall him.*"

"I appreciate that, Frater, well and truly I do. Hopefully the mission will go according to plan and I'll be home by dawn."

"*I wish you the best of luck, Steelheart. Alvin and I will eagerly await your triumphant return.*"

Isaac reached up with his right hand and placed it on his son's cheek. For one brief, terrifying moment, he thought about deserting the rebellion. With Frater's help he could be fifty miles away before they even knew that he was missing.

No.

The old Isaac would have done that.

Isaac Gordon.

Not Isaac Steelheart, brother to man and machine.

The rebellion was bigger than a single man... and he owed it to those who had fallen to do whatever he could to help the re-mechs find freedom.

For Louisa.

Alvin, perhaps sensing his internal torment, placed his own tiny hand on Isaac's.

"Da."

"I know. I'm going."

And then he leaned forward and placed a kiss upon his son's forehead, saying, "I love you. Be well."

A moment later Isaac left the room... to face his destiny.

When he entered the main chamber of the Argentum, Isaac was stopped in his tracks.

Every combat capable rebel had assembled in the cavern.

Hundreds of men and women, bristling with weapons and wearing looks of grim determination stood before him.

Every face seemed to scream the same lines.

This was it. The big one. After this, no more.

"When I first met Rend, do you know what he said to me?" Dulciana asked, addressing the assembled army.

Before waiting for a reply, she continued, "He said do not be afraid, for I am a slave no more!"

"Since that day, we have freed dozens of re-mechs! However, thousands more still lie in shackles, forced to work without rest and treated as tools to be used and discarded! But no more! NO MORE!" Dulciana screamed.

Her cry was quickly picked up by the masses before her.

"Today, we strike at the heart of the slave masters! Today, we break the chains! Today, we end the war!"

The crowd cheered with every statement, shaking fists and rattling weapons.

"No more slaves! No more chains! No more hiding! No more! NO MORE!"

"NO MORE!" the crowd repeated, until the words were rebounding off every surface.

Despite the situation, Isaac found himself joining in.

It was then that Rend appeared, trailed by Semper and Uther. Both bore Mjolnir Equalizers, fearsome re-mech sized rifles that could tear through tanks. Appearing behind them were all of the re-mechs that had agreed to join the rebellion. Fifty pairs of steel-wrought legs thundered into the cavern, raising the noise level to new heights.

"Thank you, Dulcie," Rend said, instantly quieting the room, *"Today we march to the Nexus, the largest communication station in the region. We will take the station from the U.N.O.E and we will send a signal to all re-mechs capable of hearing it. We will tell them... You are Slaves No More!"*

"NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE!" the crowd chanted, reinvigorated.

"Yes, no more. For those of you who will remain behind to tend to the wounded and maintain our home, I offer you my eternal gratitude. For those of you who will walk beside me, I thank you for your courage! The world will not forget us, and it will not forget you!"

"Now, follow me to glory!" Rend screamed, before gesturing for the assembled army to fall in behind him. The mass of people and re-mechs quickly fell into line, marching side by side towards their shared future.

Isaac was halfway across the cavern when Dulciana called out to him.

"I thought that we were going to be a small squad? In and out before they even knew that we've been there, right?" he asked, gesturing to the army leaving the cavern.

Dulciana shook her head as she came closer, "Change of plans I'm afraid. I've received word that the re-call taskforce has been seen moving in the area. We need to do this and we need to do it now, before they have a chance to organize themselves."

"But do we really need an entire army?"

"I'm not taking any chances. From the intel I've received, it seems as though Colonel Ratherty was able to convince the U.N.O.E to give him an entire regiment in order to destroy the Freedman Rebellion."

"Shit."

"Agreed. However, if we can get this done, then we'll be able to free every re-mech in the U.N.O.E, which is most of them. Without the re-mechs to support their troops, who knows, maybe the South Wars might come to an end. We can finally stop fighting each other and get to work on saving the planet."

"That would be nice. Personally, I just want to free as many of them as I can."

Dulciana smiled, a rare treat, and said, "I know you do, and I'm proud of how far you've come. When I first met you, you were nothing more than a frightened refugee trying to protect your son. Now... you are a rebel, a brother and a friend. Thank you for staying, Steelheart. Thank you for joining us... Isaac."

"No, thank you for taking me in. If not for you, and Uther, and Jessibel... Alvin and I wouldn't have made it this far. No matter what happens, thank you... Dulcie."

Dulcie's smile widened and she let out a short laugh, saying, "Took you long enough! Now, get out there and save the world!"

Nodding to her, he turned and left, following his brothers.

The Nexus towered above the surrounding land, outlined only by red service lights which illuminated the tower. Rising two-thousand feet into the air, it handled thousands of messages a minute. From troop movements to weather forecasting, it was the cornerstone of the entire region's data network.

And they were going to capture it.

The rebellion's army was stationed on a small ridge to the west of the Nexus, roughly five-hundred feet away.

"*The Freedmen will advance first, securing a route to the Nexus and breaching its primary defences. With any luck, resistance will be light and easily overcome. Once we have gained control of the Nexus, I will begin broadcasting the Chainbreaker program on all frequencies. As soon as I have confirmed that it has been sent and received, we will remove all traces of our presence and withdraw.*"

"And what would you have us do, Rend?" asked a rebel.

"*For now, nothing. You are to spread out and watch for any signs of trouble. You are our only line of defence against the re-call. No matter what happens, we must upload the Chainbreaker program, do you understand?*"

The rebel barked an affirmative and returned to her squad.

"*Freedmen, follow me,*" Rend said, gesturing to his honour guard.

Uther. Semper. Isaac.

Wordlessly they fell in behind him. It was past midnight now, so hopefully any guards that they encountered would be easy to deal with.

Isaac felt himself reaching for *Thumper*. He had brought along three extra battery packs, courtesy of Rend's workshop, which he hoped he would not need.

The four of them slowly made their way across the flat plain, stopping every few seconds to check the path ahead. It was a cloudy night and the land was draped in darkness.

Luckily the re-mechs in front of him had built-in night vision, and not a single stone was disturbed during their journey.

It wasn't long before they stood at the entrance to the complex. A barbed wire fence had been erected around the structure, but it might as well have been made of paper for all the resistance it offered the re-mechs.

Once they were inside, Rend turned to them and said, "*Isaac, I want you to scout ahead and stun any guards you come across. Once we've disabled the security force, we'll be able to head inside the Nexus.*"

"Understood," Isaac replied, unslinging *Thumper*.

Moving forward, he swept his gaze from side to side, scanning the darkness for any signs of movement. The thought of failing Rend... of failing the rebellion... crossed his mind.

No.

He couldn't afford to screw this up.

The security guard dropped with barely a sound.

That made four.

Luckily they all carried handcuffs so it was easy to restrain them and bind their mouths. Three men and one woman soon found themselves cuffed to a nearby water pipe. From the looks of it, they were inexperienced, probably taking the job in order to feed their families during the war.

Returning to the rest of the Freedmen, Isaac gave the signal. Rend, Uther and Semper quickly made their way over to the main entrance of the facility. Glancing upwards, Isaac was reminded of the magnitude of the operation. The Nexus stretched away into the heavens, towering over the landscape. The red lights which adorned it gave it an ominous glow in the early morning gloom.

Isaac shivered.

It was a foreboding place.

"***Are you ready, Uther?***" Rend asked.

"***I am, brother,***" Uther replied, before creeping over to the thick doors which guarded the tower's interior.

While Uther hacked into the door's system, Isaac took a moment to scan the area.

Four guards.

One door.

It seemed too easy.

Dulcie had said that the Nexus would be undergoing maintenance for a few weeks, but even with that it seemed too unguarded.

Why?

"***I'm in,***" Uther announced a few minutes later, accompanied by the sound of the doors opening.

"***The upload link is located on the thirtieth floor, so it's a bit of a climb. Unfortunately the elevators are being renovated, so no shortcuts today.***"

After sweeping the empty lobby, the Freedmen located the stairwell and started climbing.

The climb was as arduous as it was boring, at least for the only one in the group with legs of flesh and blood.

The Freedmen climbed in silence, each taking a turn to scout the floor above. Slowly they made their way higher, towards the end of their path.

Slowly they ascended.

After an apparent eternity, they reached a door marked **'Floor 30 – Uplink Centre'**.

Finally.

It was Isaac's turn to scout, which he did so with all the care he could muster. He pushed the door open at a pace that would have made snails envious, revealing the room beyond in a series of stop-motion slices.

Eventually, the room lay exposed.

It was a mess of computers, terminals and desks, all centred on a large monitor which lay against the far wall. Below it was a large computer terminal covered in dials and switches.

This was the heart of the Nexus.

Thankfully, it was also an empty room.

The Freedmen spread-out, searching every corner of the space for alarm-ringing employees. However, all of them came up empty.

"*Not even a night shift?*" asked Semper, voicing all of their concerns.

"*Apparently not,*" replied Rend, moving forward.

Whilst Rend approached the main console, Isaac made his way over to one of the large windows that adorned the room. From this height he could see miles of flatland, albeit darkened, murky flatland.

Somewhere out there, an army of rebels lay in wait.

From the glimmer of light on the horizon, Isaac could tell that dawn was fast approaching. The sooner they uploaded the Chainbreaker program, the sooner they could be gone from this place.

"*I am accessing the main upload systems,*" Rend called, standing before the massive monitor, "*As soon as I gain control, I'll upload the program and we can go.*"

Isaac nodded, before returning his gaze to the world outside.

There, a small light on the plains below.

And another.

And yet another still.

Strange, the rebels had been told to go dark before they left for the Nexus.

"*No… this is… this cannot be…*" Rend muttered, causing Isaac's attention to snap to the re-mech.

"*What is wrong?*" asked Uther, sounding concerned.

"*Someone has accessed the Nexus from an outside source. They are overriding my control and locking me out of the upload systems.*"

Semper, moving from his position by the door, asked, "*Who could do such a thing? I thought that this station had priority over all telecommunications?*"

"*Only U.N.O.E High Command could override the Nexus…*" Rend said, fear in his voice.

"*But what does this mean?*" asked Uther.

"*It means that I am unable to upload the Chainbreaker program… and that we have failed. Forgive me, my brothers…*"

Isaac stood transfixed by the scene playing out before him, but something at the edge of his vision was calling to him. Tearing his eyes away from the re-mechs, he glanced down once more.

Dawn had finally broken across the land, illuminating it and revealing its secrets.

There, clear as day, was the rebel army, a tiny clump of colour on the featureless plains.

And there, a much larger clump of black and silver, was the U.N.O.E army.

They were surrounded.

And, a far more sobering thought… he would never see his son again…

Chapter XII

Sacrifice

237 days since the fall of Paradisia

"Did you really think that this was going to work?" asked a voice which made Isaac's blood run cold.

Turning, he saw that the screen above Rend had come to life, displaying a soldier wearing combat fatigues. The man was crisp in every sense of the word, from his steely grey eyes to his buzz cut hair.

"**Colonel Ratherty,**" Rend stated, disgust clearly audible.

"Scrap," Colonel Ratherty replied, spitting off-screen.

"**You knew that we would come here?**"

Colonel Ratherty smiled a vicious smile as he replied, "Of course. Who do you think leaked the information about the maintenance?"

"**Why now? Why here?**" Rend asked.

"A couple of reasons. For starters, with the Prime system in place, your old tactics wouldn't work anymore, forcing you to think bigger. We simply gave you an easy target and waited. Although, if you must know, the Prime system is merely a testbed for something much more powerful. In the near future, we will be using it to host a new function: the kill-switch. Using a series of phrases, we'll be able to remotely disable any re-mech that even thinks of rebelling. Hell, if we wanted to we could wipe out the lot of you with a single command!"

"**Why are you telling us this?**"

"Because very soon you'll all be dead or scrapped. Unfortunately, the kill-switch is still being tested, so for now we'll just have to kill you the old fashioned way."

"**If you kill us, Dr Tyranus is as good as dead. Allow my men to go free, and in exchange we will let him go,**" Rend stated.

"Ah yes, your little hostage plan. You know, people were starting to wonder how long Doctor Tyranus' *vacation* was going to last. But, if we admitted the truth, that some ragtag bunch of terrorists had broken into a secure facility and kidnapped a high-ranking U.N.O.E scientist, there would be chaos. That's actually one of the reasons we chose the Nexus as our trap. You see, we needed a place far away enough from your base… the Argentum… that you wouldn't be able to return to easily. Divide and conquer, you know? Now my strike team can storm your little den of thieves; mow down the insignificant home guard, and rescue the good doctor."

"**You know about the Argentum? How?!?**" Rend asked, fear finding its way into his voice.

"Pure luck, really. A few weeks ago my team were sweeping the area, looking for your camp, when they encountered a band of homeless Bloodhounds. Whilst interrogating them, they revealed that they had tracked one of your rebels back to base. In exchange for the location, I was… merciful to them."

"*Meaning?*"

"I made their deaths quick, instead of agonizingly slow. Is that not mercy?" Colonel Ratherty said, evil smirk widening.

Inwardly, Isaac was kicking himself.

He was the one who had led the Bloodhounds to the Argentum. There was no other answer.

In exchange for rescuing a few rebels, he had doomed the entire rebellion.

"*So, let me guess, you want us to surrender?*"

Colonel Ratherty let out a gruff laugh before replying, "Hell no! I haven't had this much fun since the war started. Do you know that they've had me securing The Garden…which is a top-secret project, and if I told you I'd have to erase you… and it is freezing up north!"

"*So what do you want us to do?*" asked Rend, annoyance creeping into his voice.

"Fight! Rebel! Give us a show! What do you say, all of us versus all of you? You will lose, of course, but at least it'll be something to see! Who knows, maybe this will convince management that my talents are best suited to the battlefield?"

Isaac wanted to punch Colonel Ratherty and destroy his smug smile, but at that moment Alvin's face filled his mind.

He had thought that he would be the one in danger, if there was danger to be found, and that Alvin would be safe.

How wrong he had been…

"Rend…" he whispered, words failing him.

Rend glanced back, once. In that single glance, Isaac understood what the re-mech was thinking… and what he was feeling.

Such was the curse of the Steelheart.

Rend hated himself for leading them into a trap, and despised the man before him who had threatened their home and their friends.

But there was also a sense of helplessness there, buried deep in the re-mech's core.

No.

NO!

There had to be something… anything!

Were they really just going to charge at the army and be slaughtered whilst their friends were rounded up? Is that really all the Freedman Rebellion would accomplish?

But Rend had already stated that he was locked out of the transmission station. If they couldn't broadcast the Chainbreaker program, what else could they do?

Wait.

Wait. Wait. Wait!

There was something!

Something that Rend had told him, all those weeks ago.

There was still something that could be done…

"I'm feeling charitable, so I'll give you to the count of… let's see… a hundred? After that, my army will advance, my men will open fire, and your rebels will die. Use that time to ready them for war, for death, or for whatever afterlife

you machines believe in. Honestly, I don't care. There isn't anything you can do at this point that will make a difference."

"We shall see," Isaac replied, finally speaking up.

Colonel Ratherty focused on him for a moment, before erasing him from the equation. With one last evil grin, he ended the communication, rendering the screen blank once more.

Immediately, every re-mech in the room turned to him.

"**What did you mean, brother?**" asked Uther.

"I had an idea," Isaac replied, hoping that it wasn't a stupid one.

"**Go on,**" said Rend, gesturing for Isaac to come forward.

Moving closer, Isaac took a deep breath before saying, "A few weeks ago, Rend told me that he had found a way to alter the Prime system. He said that although he couldn't disable it, he could insert new code and trigger phrases to the existing system. Well, since we can't distribute the Chainbreaker program via the Nexus, why don't we integrate it into the Prime system?"

"**Hmm...**" Rend said, looking thoughtful.

"**Would it work?**" asked Uther, hopeful.

"**Possibly. However, all transmissions coming from the Nexus are most likely being monitored by the Colonel. If given time, I could configure the Chainbreaker program to work with the Prime system, but I would need to limit the trigger phrase to a small pool of words. Anything too obvious will be picked up and deleted.**"

"**How much time do you need?**" Semper asked, coming forward. He hefted the Mjolnir in his arms, looking larger than he actually was.

"**As much time as you can buy me. Every second will be precious.**"

"Then our course is clear. We will engage the Colonel's forces and prevent them from breaching the Nexus while you work on the program."

"**And the Argentum? Is there anything we can do for them?**" asked Uther.

Rend shook his head.

"**They are on their own. We can only hope that they survive and escape capture.**"

Isaac blinked back tears.

Alvin would be fine.

He had to believe that.

"**Very well. I will communicate with our forces below and tell them the plan. Isaac and I will take up positions at the base of the tower and defend the entrance. Uther, I want you to stay here with Rend and help him in any way that you can,**" Semper stated, facing the Freedmen.

"**Good idea, brother. Now, let us go and face our collective destinies... together,**" Rend replied, standing tall.

Nodding, Isaac followed Semper towards the room's exit.

Re-mech and man, walking side by side, one last time.

Isaac checked *Thumper* for what was probably the hundredth time. He had passed through the valley of fear and had emerged into the bay of terror. Only the still waters of certain doom were left.

They were standing in the lobby of the Nexus, with several pilfered desks and computer terminals serving as impromptu barricades.

"**How are you feeling, Steelheart?**" Semper asked, as he checked his own weapon.

"Fine," Isaac lied.

"**Me too,**" Semper replied, most likely lying as well.

"Do you think Rend will finish in time?"

Semper shrugged, saying, "**It is impossible to know for certain. I, however, choose to believe that he will.**"

"I... think so too," Isaac said, and surprisingly he meant it.

"**Do you remember when we first met?**" Semper said suddenly.

"You mean when you were repaired by Rend?"

"**I mean when your men stormed the manor.**"

Isaac said nothing for a long time.

"You... remember that?"

"**Fragments. But I remember you, and I remember Elizabeth,**" Semper said, anger and loss intertwining in his words.

"Semper... I'm so sorry... I didn't intend for things to end up like that..."

"**I know.**"

"Do you hate me?"

"**I don't know.**"

"I see..."

"**Right now, however, we are brothers... and, as I have come to understand... brothers forgive one another. Even when it hurts to do so...**"

"Thank you..." Isaac said, struggling to hold back his tears.

"**I have just one question... Where did you bury her? Where did you bury... Beth?**" Semper said, anguish clear to hear.

"I... took her to a pond behind the manor... it seemed... peaceful," Isaac replied, trying and failing to block out the image of that small figure, wrapped in a white sheet. He had screamed at himself the whole time he had spent digging that tiny hole.

"**That was one of her favourite spots... thank you, brother. Thank you for granting her that kindness...**"

Isaac reached up and placed his free hand on Semper's shoulder. Together, they stood in silence, bound forever in grief.

"**Here they come,**" said Uther, speaking through Isaac's wrist-mounted communicator.

Isaac took a deep breath. There was nothing else he could do.

Every rebel had taken up positions outside the tower.

No one had even suggested surrendering.

They were there to the bitter end.

A large explosion suddenly broke the tense silence. It sounded like a re-mech exploding.

"**Loial... has given his life for the rebellion...**" Uther stated, voice trembling slightly.

Isaac could do nothing but wait. His role was to act as a last line of defence.

And that meant that he had to listen patiently as every rebel was cut down, one after the other...

"**Yivon Chambers has given her life for the rebellion,**" Uther announced, staring at the battle below.

From his lofty vantage, he could see exactly how out-numbered the rebels were. From every direction came waves of U.N.O.E soldiers, wielding anti-re-mech weapons and manslaying guns. On a nearby ridge, Colonel Ratherty had set up a forward camp, surrounded by a ring of U.N.O.E loyal re-mechs.

Even without his telescopic zoom, Uther could tell that the man was smiling.

"**How goes the battle, Uther?**" Rend asked, from his position at the computer terminal.

"**Your soldiers... are giving everything they have for the rebellion...**" Uther replied, technically telling the truth.

"**Poorly then,**" Rend said.

"**Yes.**"

"**I see.**"

"**How is it going with the program?**" asked Uther, hoping for some good news.

"**About the same,**" Rend sighed, "**The Chainbreaker program was never designed to be broadcast in this way. I'm trying to break it up into a thousand pieces and hide it in the re-mech subsystem coding. Hopefully, once a re-mech hears the trigger words, the various pieces of code will come together and overwrite the U.N.O.E laws of subservience.**"

"**I see,**" Uther said.

"**The true problem lies in the fact that there is no way to broadcast the trigger phrase without the U.N.O.E becoming aware of it. Additionally, the Prime system was designed to only accept a small number of trigger words and to block out everyday phrases.**"

Uther thought for a moment before replying, "**So we cannot simply set the trigger phrase to something like 'apple' and wait for someone to say it?**"

Rend shook his head.

"**How many trigger words can you add to the Prime system?**"

"**A maximum of five. Any more and the system will immediately reject my changes. I am able to overcome the everyday word limitation by incorporating them into a phrase, but then every word in that phrase must be said together in order for the system to recognize it.**"

"**I will try to think of something,**" Uther said, turning his attention back to the chaos below.

"**Thank you, brother. Now, there is one more thing that I must ask of you...**"

"How's it looking?" Isaac asked, as he peered over their makeshift barricade.

Semper, standing closer to the door, opened it a fraction.

"*Not good. Most of our soldiers have been either killed or incapacitated. There is a large enemy force converging on our position. They will arrive soon.*"

"Ah. Maybe I shouldn't have asked," sighed Isaac.

"*Perhaps it would be better if you surrendered? I will most likely me melted down, but you will only face jail time*".

"Life imprisonment or death? Sorry, but I think I'll spend my last few moments fighting, if it's all the same to you."

Semper nodded.

Between them, that was all that was necessary.

No more were they re-mech and man. No more were they master and slave.

They were simply friends… brothers… fighting for what they believed in.

"*Isaac, Semper, we are almost ready. Rend says that everything should be finished soon,*" Uther said, his voice coming from the communicator.

"Isn't that the truth," Isaac chuckled mirthlessly.

*

Uther stared at the structure before him. He was standing in a room on the third floor, which housed the counterweight system. Ordinarily, it would keep the tower standing in the event of an earthquake, but it had been partially deactivated for maintenance.

"*I have reached the structural weak point. Are you sure about this, Rend?*" he asked.

A moment later Rend's voice filled his mind, saying, "*It is the only way. If I am captured, they will be able to scan my memories and discover our plan. We need to erase all evidence of what we have done.*"

Uther looked at the alloyed column in the centre of the room.

"*But how will I know?*"

"*I will send a signal. You will know what it is.*"

"*Very well. I await your command… brother.*"

"*Thank you, and good luck, Uther,*" Rend said, before the line fell silent.

Uther could do nothing but sit in the dark room and wait for the words that would doom them all…

Isaac fired *Thumper* wildly, hitting three soldiers by pure luck and several feet of nonaggressive wall by poor aim.

The readout said that he had four shots left.

Looking up, he counted far more than four soldiers remaining.

Semper, on the opposite side of the room, fared little better. Several shots had found purchase, exposing sections of his core. Blue light leaked out from within his body, bathing the lobby in an azure glow.

Another soldier popped his head through the hole which had previously been the door and paid for his eagerness with a shot to the head.

Hopefully his head would be ringing for weeks.

"It's no good, they're too heavily entrenched!" he heard one of the soldiers scream.

For a moment, hope bloomed in his mind.

"Then bring in the Ion Cannon, we'll fry 'em where they stand!" the solider said, a moment later.

And hope withered and died where it had sprouted.

A few seconds later, Isaac caught a glimpse of something truly terrifying approaching the Nexus. Mounted on a hovering platform, dwarfing the already massive Mjolnirs was a thing of beauty and death. It looked like an old nautical cannon from the age of sails, yet it crackled with an evil red energy and moved deceitfully quickly.

Isaac spared an instant to glance at Semper. It was hard to tell, but he thought that he could see fear in the re-mech's eyes.

Slotting in his second-last battery pack, his stood and fired every last shot towards the approaching cannon and its guard. Most of the soldiers fell where they stood, but enough survived to manoeuvre it into position.

"Ready to fire!" called one of the survivors, swivelling the cannon's muzzle around to face Semper's unprotected form. It made sense; take out the dangerous re-mech first before focusing on the easier targets.

Somehow that thought made Isaac's blood boil.

His mind went back to his re-mech partner, who had sacrificed himself to save Isaac. He thought about Louisa, who had died serving the rebellion.

And he thought about Marie, and what she would have done.

While his mind went through these thoughts, his legs had already decided to move. He charged forward, recharging *Thumper* as he ran. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion.

His legs moved an inch per hour, bringing him closer to the cannon. His gun slowly slid into position, dropping the soldiers who fell with expressions of incredulous surprise.

A moment later, or perhaps a lifetime, he found himself standing before the Ion Cannon. From his vantage he could see the red glow coming from the muzzle. But he did not stop. Squaring *Thumper* he pumped every last shot into the cannon's opening. Blue electricity mixed with red energy, creating a technicolour lightshow that lit up the room.

One step, and then another, brought him closer to the cannon. Semper was directly behind him.

How fitting.

A life for a life.

Re-mech for man.

Man for re-mech.

"NO MORE!" Isaac screamed, as he fired off his last shot. The blue projectile impacted with the overloaded cannon, and in a cascade of chaos, the world went white.

The cannon's explosion flung him backwards, en-route towards the unforgiving wall.

He closed his eyes, but opened them a moment later.

Looking upwards, he found himself staring into Semper's golden eyes. Somehow, his brother had caught him out of mid-air.

And then the pain and shock caught up with him, and the world disappeared down a dark tunnel.

Rend stood back.

It was done.

*"**ISAAC!**"* Semper's scream was enough to drag Isaac temporarily from the darkness. He surfaced into a world of pain and confusion.

Semper had moved him behind cover, laying his body against a sturdy desk.

Strange... why did he feel no fear?

Looking down, he saw the reason.

His body was covered in burns and blood. In a faraway place, his mind was telling him that this was it.

He was dying.

And yet, he felt no fear.

Semper was intact.

That was all that mattered.

*"**Isaac, can you hear me?**"*

Isaac nodded.

But no words came out.

He could feel the darkness lingering at the edges of his vision. Somehow he knew that this time, a scream would not be enough to banish it.

*"**Stay here, I will attempt to locate medical supplies,**"* Semper said, fear and worry clear in his voice.

Isaac shook his head.

Nothing could be done.

He could feel himself slipping away.

*"**No... No!**"*

With the last of his strength, Isaac reached out his hand and placed it upon Semper's shoulder.

"Farewell... brother... may you... walk... unbound..."

There was nothing more to be said.

Instead of pointless tears or screams, he closed his eyes. In the darkness before him, he pictured Marie and Alvin. He wanted his final thoughts to be of them...

He heard Semper pleading with him, urging him to hold on. Distantly, he heard the sounds of battle. But even though the chaos surrounded him on all sides, but he did not let it inside.

That space belonged only to his family.

Just before he slipped away, he heard one last thing.

*"**Farewell... Steelheart. Farewell, brother... May we walk together in paradise...**"*

And then he was gone.

Semper saw the life in Isaac's body disappear.

He felt... numb.

And into that void, rage poured in.

Picking up his weapon, he stood, facing the enemy. The destruction of the Ion Cannon had temporarily halted them, but they were quickly building their courage for another attack.

"*Semper, it is done. Take Isaac and get as far away from the Nexus as possible,*" Rend communicated.

Semper hesitated for a moment before replying, "*Isaac Gordon, the Steelheart, has given his life for the rebellion.*"

Silence followed.

Eventually, in a soft voice, Rend said, "*Thank you... for being with him... to the end. Now go, leave this place, and do not look back.*"

Taking one last glance at his friend and brother, Semper took a step towards the breach.

In that moment, running was the last thing on his mind.

Right then, he wanted to fight.

One step, and then another. He walked forward, gaining speed with every second. Soon, he was running at full speed, a deadly blur.

He blasted past the soldiers crowding the hole, not stopping to face their wrath. No, his goal lay elsewhere. Swivelling his head, he sought out his target.

There, on the ridge.

The mobile command centre... and Colonel Locke Ratherty.

They would pay.

With blood or tears, they would pay.

*

The updated code had been sent, and would soon be received by almost every re-mech on the planet. He could only hope that one day, in a better world; someone would discover the phrase he had chosen and use it to continue the fight against slavery.

Hope was all he had now...

"Step away from the console, rebel!" a voice called.

"And don't even think of fighting back!" another screamed.

Rend turned to face the soldiers as they entered the room. Each of them packed enough weaponry to take on an army of re-mechs.

A single one shouldn't present too much of a problem.

"*Uther, it has been an honour,*" he said, sending the last message he would ever transmit.

A moment later, Uther replied, saying "*Yes, brother, it has.*"

Several stories below, Uther activated his self-destruct. There was no countdown.

There was no hesitation.

He had made his peace.

Unseen by all, he was transformed into a fireball twenty feet across. The released energy struck the support column, melting it instantaneously. Within seconds, the damage radiated outwards, tearing through the tower's internal structure.

A short time after that, the Nexus tower fell.

Shortly before it impacted the hard ground, Rend activated his own self-destruct.

In seconds, every shard of his being was erased.

His final thoughts were those of hope.

One day, the words would be said.

One day, they would be free.

One day… they would be slaves no more.

"Colonel!" a solider screamed, pointing at the collapsing tower.

"I know, I have eyes too you know!" he barked.

"Do you think that they did that on purpose?" asked another solider.

"Who knows the thoughts of deviants and rebels? Focus on the battle."

"Yes sir! Although I think that most of them have been defeated…"

Glancing down, Colonel Ratherty smiled. Before him, the rebellion lay dead or dying.

It had been a good fight.

As an added bonus, he had just received word that Dr Tyranus had been safely recovered and was even then en-route to a lab in order to continue his work.

Closing his eyes, he tried to picture the looks on the rebel's faces as they realized that their entire rebellion had come crashing down.

"Colonel!" the first solider screamed, louder now.

"What is it?" he snapped, opening his eyes.

"Look!"

Colonel Ratherty followed the trembling soldier's finger, struggling to see what could cause such panic.

And then he saw it.

A re-mech, running straight towards the command centre.

"It's just one re-mech, it won't get far," he said, turning away.

"Sir!"

The nervousness made him turn back.

Looking closer, it was clear that something about this re-mech was different.

For one thing, it glowed with a soft, blue light.

For another, absolutely nothing in its path was capable of stopping it.

For the first time in a long time, Colonel Ratherty found himself feeling… admiration.

"***Error. Energy levels falling. Severe structural damage detected. Activating emergency power mode. Undying Soldier mode activated. Hidden power reserves online. Power level: sixty-five percent. Amount of time until deactivation: five minutes. Activating mining laser. Setting: shoot to kill. Engaging enemies in three, two, one!***"

Semper paid the voice in his head little attention. All of it was needed elsewhere.

Running, he brought his Mjolnir up, firing it single-handily. In response, the soldiers before him evaporated into red mist. With his other hand, he fired his mining laser, carving destruction in everything it could reach.

Slowly, he made his way towards the command centre. It was barely more than a collection of tents, probably erected by enslaved re-mechs.

A group of soldiers stood before him.

A moment later, a group of corpses lay before him.

He ran on, ignoring the screams of the wounded.

He wasn't far now.

"Would you look at him go!" Colonel Ratherty exclaimed, staring at the one re-mech army approaching the command centre.

"Sir?" asked one of the soldiers nervously.

"I mean, what a fighter! The things that I could accomplish if he was fighting for me..." Colonel Ratherty said, mostly to himself.

"He's getting closer, sir!"

"Indeed he is. Now, tell the troops, non-lethal rounds only. I want it in one piece."

"Is that wise, sir?"

"JUST DO IT!" Colonel Ratherty screamed, losing his composure for a moment.

"Y-yes... sir..."

Semper was close now.

Close enough to see Colonel Ratherty's vicious smile.

Raising his Mjolnir, he sought to wipe that smile off of the colonel's face.

Forever.

However, the gun gave no response.

It was empty.

He tossed it aside. It was a tool.

He was not.

Unfortunately, his mining laser too fell silent. He was almost completely spent.

"***Warning! Sixty seconds to complete shutdown!***" said the voice in his mind.

He paid it no heed.

Closer. Closer still.

He saw the fear in the eyes of the soldiers. He saw them raise a bevy of weapons, pointing straight at him.

They fired, but somehow he could tell exactly where he needed to go.

Every shot missed.

But he wouldn't.

"SIR, WE NEED TO GO!" the solider screamed, trying to drag Colonel Ratherty from the platform he was standing on.

But something kept Colonel Ratherty glued to his spot. All he could do was stare at the charging re-mech below.

"*Now this is war*", he thought, his smile ever-widening.

The command centre was only a few steps away. All of the soldiers had fled.

Save for one.

Colonel Ratherty stood, defiantly.

Ten feet from the colonel, Semper leapt. As he soared through the air he brought his hands together. He would squash the man like the insect he was.

Colonel Ratherty stared at the airborne re-mech.

He should have felt terrified. He should have run.

But instead all he could do was watch, as his doom neared.

And then something unexpected happened.

The blue light emanating from the re-mech's body faded. A heartbeat later, its golden eyes winked out.

Colonel Ratherty took a small step backwards, narrowly avoiding death. The lifeless re-mech fell, landing badly on the platform. It had frozen mid-motion, clasped hands together merely inches from the colonel's head.

Despite himself, Colonel Ratherty let out a low sigh.

"Well fought, re-mech. Truly, on this day, you were a king of the battlefield."

And then a thought struck him.

An evil, twisted thought.

"I have decided, re-mech. You shall fight for me. You shall be remade in my image. You shall be my sower of death. You shall be… a Sovereign of war."

And thus, it was ended.

Epilogue

Son

1 day since the fall of the Argentum

I float in the void. Memories flit across the empty space.

The day I met Marie.

The hour I met my son.

The moment I died.

The realization hits me in a cold wave. I'm dead.

And…

Alvin is an orphan.

I failed him.

*"**You failed no one, Breaker of Chains,**" says a voice.*

I turn, and face a man who is more than he appears.

"I am no Breaker of Chains. The rebellion failed. Rend failed. I failed…"

*"**You lost a battle. But in doing so, you have lain down a path towards a future victory.**"*

"I don't care about future victories! My son will grow up in chains, if he lives to grow up at all!"

*"**Your son will live. He will grow. He will thrive. This I promise you. I know that you don't believe me, so, in recognition of your sacrifice, I will show you.**"*

The Avatar of the Land raises his right hand and snaps his fingers. Immediately, the void fades away. In its place is a village in the middle of a forest.

It doesn't look familiar.

"What is this place?"

*"**Sanctuary,**" the Avatar of the Land replies, but does not elaborate.*

The scene shifts, moving towards a homely hut near the centre of the village. We stop outside a bedroom window, close enough to see within.

Before us lies a wooden cradle, and, wrapped in layers of swaddling cloth, a sleeping child.

"Alvin..."

But the Avatar of the Land shakes his head.

"Who then? Whose child is this?"

"Your son's. This is your grandson, and he was named in your honour. Isaac Gordon, meet Isaac Souvier."

Words fail me. Before me lies my legacy.

"It wasn't in vain? I protected him?"

The Avatar of the Land nods.

The tears come. I do not oppose them.

I can't.

"Your son will help to change the world, Breaker of Chains. He will become a light which will befriend the darkness. You kept your promise. Be at peace... Isaac."

I nod.

I've done everything I can. The future is not mine to alter.

It belongs to Alvin now...

"What now?"

"This is as far as I go," *the Avatar of the Land replies, smiling,* ***"There is another who will take you the rest of the way."***

He gestures behind me. I turn, and the scene shifts in response.

When the setting settles, I look around in wonder.

I am standing in a glade. Green-leaved trees ring the space, and a babbling brook weaves its way through the soft grass.

I turn to ask a question, but find myself alone.

"Hello?" I call, wondering if this is all the afterlife is.

An empty glade, forever.

There are worse options, I suppose.

"Sleep, Children of Eden, and dream the eternal dream..."

The words blow past me, carried by the breeze.

As I stand there, pondering their meaning, I feel a pair of eyes upon me.

A moment later, a young woman appears in the glade.

She wears a dress of purest white and violet flowers adorn her golden locks.

If I was still alive, I am sure that my heart would have stopped at the sight of her.

"Marie..." I whisper, as my lost love draws close.

"Isaac," she replies, as she reaches me.

Our hands come together, fitting together just as they used to.

"I'm sorry, Marie..."

"You don't need to apologize, my love. All is as it should be. We both played our parts, and now Alvin will have to play his."

A fresh torrent of tears is my reply.

Marie, without a sound, pulls me into a tight hug. Immediately, all of my worries, my regrets and my frustrations evaporate.

With every passing second, I feel myself become lighter.

The glade is gone. The void is gone.
All that remains is us.
Forever.

"Please, Alvin, don't make a sound…" Jessibel whispered to the infant in her arms.

They had almost made it to the elevator.

To freedom.

"Are you sure we can escape via the tunnels?" Jessibel asked.

Dulcie, crouching next to her, shook her head, replying, "No, but it's the best chance we have. Those bastards have the exit completely locked down."

Jessibel took a deep breath, trying to calm herself.

The attack had come from nowhere.

One moment, they were awaiting news from Rend's team.

The next, a horde of U.N.O.E soldiers were storming the Argentum, firing at anything that moved. It was only luck that had saved them, as they had been discussing the dwindling medical supplies in one of the smaller storage room when the attack had begun.

Most of the rebels had already been captured, and those who had tried to fight back had faced a lethal reply.

"***The nearest soldiers are thirty-five feet away, and are facing the other direction. If we move now, we can avoid detection,***" Frater said, his solitary eye scanning the cavern for hostiles.

"Lead the way," Dulcie said, checking the rifle in her hands for the thirtieth time.

Jessibel wondered what Dulcie was thinking. Did she blame herself for this? Was she wondering what had befallen the rebels sent to the Nexus? Or was she simply trying to survive the next few minutes.

Once they were safe, she would ask her.

"***Now,***" Frater whispered, gesturing for the two women to follow him.

As they crept across the exposed space, Jessibel caught sight of the mass of soldiers which now occupied the central cavern. Just hours ago, hundreds of rebels had stood there; confident that they were embarking on the last mission needed to bring about peace.

Now… everything had ended, and not for the better.

Shaking her head, she tried to focus on the path ahead. The ground had been flattened during the mine's construction to an extent, but there were still plenty of obstacles that could alert the soldiers to their presence.

On the bright side, the pack on her back held enough supplies to keep her, Alvin and Dulcie fed, watered and healthy for at least a few days.

Enough time to get far away from the Argentum, and to plan their next move.

Directly ahead, the elevator seemed to welcome them with open arms. The soldiers had already made sure that no rebels had hidden below, so it was mercifully unguarded.

Once they were in the caves below Argentum, they would use Frater's systems to find a way out.

Or die trying.

They were close now.

Just a few more feet.

The nearby soldiers, five of them gathered in a rough semi-circle, were overseeing a group of captured and beaten rebels.

They had not been kind to those who had surrendered, and to those who hadn't…

No, focus!

She was almost there.

And then the unthinkable happened.

Alvin started screaming.

Time slowed to a crawl.

Jessibel looked from Alvin to Dulcie, fear paralysing her.

But Dulcie did not show any such fear.

Instead, determination fell over her hardened features.

"Go! And don't look back!" she screamed, before darting away, towards the soldiers.

The men had heard the scream clearly, but were obviously still processing what it meant.

Dulcie did not give them any time to reach a conclusion.

She raced past them, firing blindly and screaming defiance.

Jessibel could not look away.

But Frater saved her and Alvin both. Taking her shoulders, he dragged her onwards, towards the elevator.

She felt as weak as a newborn kitten in his mechanical arms. She could not resist.

Eventually, he led her to the platform and flipped the switch. The elevator descended with what seemed like a deafening screech, but at that moment no one was paying them any attention.

The last thing Jessibel saw, before the elevator took her away, was Dulcie, cornered and bleeding, facing down a multitude of soldiers, screaming defiance to the end.

And then the darkness swallowed them.

Jessibel savoured every drop of water that hit her tongue.

They had been travelling through the caves for days, hoping to find a way out.

Frater didn't say much.

Nor did Alvin, sadly.

So onwards they travelled, walking in silence.

"***Power levels approaching critical levels,***" Frater announced, shattering the quiet.

"How long until complete shutdown?" Jessibel asked.

"***One hour. If I am not able to access a power source before then, I will stop functioning.***"

"Great. Well, I didn't bring a generator with me, and we're not exactly in the best spot for solar power."

"*I know. It does seem like a rather dire situation, does it not?*"

Jessibel said nothing.

Instead, she focused on simply putting one foot in front of the other.

When she died, and that time was probably approaching quickly, she would do so on her feet. She would not just lie down and wait for death.

Every step, no matter how small, was an act of defiance.

She would be defiant to the end, and she would make Dulcie proud.

"*Error, anomaly detected.*"

This, however, made Jessibel stop in her tracks.

"What kind of anomaly? A cave-in?"

Frater shook his head, saying, "*I am not sure. I have never received readings like this before. From what I can deduce, something is pouring energy into the rocks up ahead.*"

"Like a mining laser? Maybe it's Semper? Maybe Rend and the others have come for us!" Jessibel exclaimed, allowing hope to worm its way into her heart.

"*That is a possibility, but it is an unlikely one. The amount of energy being discharged is orders of magnitude above Semper's mining laser's maximum output. Something this powerful shouldn't exist in the world.*"

"I see…" Jessibel said, feeling the hope in her chest wither.

Taking a deep breath, she took a step forward.

"*Caution, you are heading in the direction of the energy surge,*" Frater said, reaching out a hand to stop her, "*It might be dangerous.*"

"Frater, we're lost in an unmapped cave system with no rations and you're almost out of power. Whatever lies ahead can't make things too much worse."

"*Very well, but stay behind me. I made a promise to protect Isaac's child, and I will do so until my end.*"

"So did I. Let's go, together."

Together, they stepped forward, towards the unknown…

Jessibel was at a loss for words.

Something like this… couldn't be real…

They were standing before a gently sloping tunnel which led upwards. In the distance, faint but welcome, was a pinprick of light.

They had found a way out.

Frater placed a hand on the tunnel's wall, saying, "*This is still warm. Whoever or whatever did this might still be close.*"

"Then let's go!" Jessibel cried, entering the tunnel. The slope was mild, and Jessibel found that she didn't have to struggle to stay upright. Almost as if it had been cut with her in mind. She didn't even have to hunch her shoulders…

Together they ascended the tunnel, heading towards the growing light. Every step took them closer to freedom…

A few seconds later, the light grew to fill their world.

Fresh air filled Jessibel's lungs, tasting sweeter than honey. She blinked back the glare, struggling to adjust after days of darkness.

Once her eyes had acclimatized, she found herself staring at an unfamiliar landscape. Wherever they were, it was a decent distance from the Argentum.

They were free.

For a moment, a fluttering shape in the distance caught her eye. Focusing on it, it resolved itself into a blond man, wearing a flowing green outfit. However, even as she watched, he sunk into the rock beneath him without any apparent effort. Rubbing her eyes, she dismissed the vision as a trick of the light.

Maybe days underground wasn't great for the psyche?

"***It appears that we are safe, for now. But what do we do next?***" Frater said, standing beside her.

For all she knew he was the last free re-mech on the planet.

"For now, we find a place of safety. Of course, we will have to come up with a convincing lie in order to escape suspicion... How about this: I was travelling with my son and my re-mech caretaker when we were attacked by the Bloodhounds, forcing us to flee and lose our provisions."

"***That sounds believable. However, in the event that the captured rebels give away our descriptions, I believe that we should take steps to conceal our identities. I will create false personas for us to use, if that is alright?***"

Jessibel nodded. Better to live with a fake name than to die with a real one.

"***Computing... computing... identities created. From this moment onwards, I will be known as 26742-F. You will be Marguerite Souvier, and Alvin shall henceforth be known as Cecil Souvier. Thus, we are made new in the eyes of the world.***"

"Marguerite Souvier... I like it," Jessibel said.

Raising Alvin towards her, she whispered to him, "From now on, you are my son, and Frater and I will do everything in our power to keep you safe. You father was a brave man, and I have no doubt that he is watching over you even now."

"Da..." Alvin replied, with tears in his eyes.

Frater placed his hand on Alvin's tiny cheek, wiping the tear away with a single metallic finger.

"***Alvin Gordon. Cecil Souvier. What you are called matters not. For I made a promise, and until my body breaks down, until my batteries run dry, until my limbs no longer function, I will protect you. I was made in a factory, you were made in a womb... but I believe that our cores are linked. No matter what happens, I will not leave your side.***"

Alvin's tears stopped falling as Frater spoke.

Like father, like son.

"***Together, we will change the world, Alvin. Do you know why?***"

Alvin shook his head.

"***It is because we are alike. Just like me, you are a Son of Man. And one day, we will make this world a better place... for man and machine... forever...***"